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Friend, Foe, or Other? Monsters and Identity on the Odyssean Sea

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**FRIEND, FOE, OR OTHER?
MONSTERS AND IDENTITY ON THE ODYSSEAN SEA**

BY

**DANIEL ADDEO BELLUM
B.A., CLASSICAL STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, 2002**

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts
Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

August, 2009

DEDICATION

To my grandparents, whose hard work has made my life possible,
and whose love has made it sweet.

To Cliff Bellum (1907-2002) and Mabel Bellum (1913-1995)
who, with open hands, extended hospitality that changed the world for so many.

To Sam Addeo (1918-1996)
who was right to believe what others thought impossible.

And to Rachel Addeo (1920-)
who asks God to cut me a break even though I'm taking long time.
Gramma, I couldn't have done it without your love, encouragement, and prayers.
I love you.

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ABSTRACT

The sea upon which Odysseus wanders in Homer's *Odyssey* is a chaotic and unpredictable place, empty of historical non-Greek cultures, but full of sea creatures, monsters, and deities eager to ensnare and devour the long-suffering hero. However, the Mediterranean of the Archaic Age that produced the *Odyssey* was a well-charted sea, where Greeks frequently interacted with foreigners.

This thesis approaches the sea in the *Odyssey* as a mythic borderland, a medium for conceptualized representations of actual intercultural exchanges between archaic Greeks and other cultures of the ancient Mediterranean. Further, using postcolonial theory, this study attempts to understand how the various maritime oddities within the *Odyssey* give form to the trauma and cultural ambiguity inherent in ancient sea travel. Finally, this thesis explores how Odysseus successfully adapts his own identity to cope with the sea's chaotic landscape, allowing the poem's ancient audience to mediate their own troubling experiences.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1 THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO HOMERIC MYTH	
Myth as a Conduit for Experience.....	4
Greek Identity and a Mediterranean Network.....	6
Boundaries and Ethnic Identity.....	10
The Sea as Cultural Chaos.....	17
CHAPTER 2 PROTEUS AND THE SEA	
Menelaus' Little <i>Odyssey</i>	25
Proteus as an Embedded Metaphor for the Sea.....	32
CHAPTER 3 THE MONSTERS-REPRESENTATIONS OF CULTURAL CHAOS	
Charybdis.....	38
Polyphemus.....	42
Circe: The Threat of Marriage.....	57
CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION: ODYSSEUS THE MONSTER	
Leukothea's Veil and the Limits of Identity.....	65
Nausikaa and Cultural Reconciliation.....	68
REFERENCES.....	74

Introduction

Recent scholarship on Homer's *Odyssey* and the epic tradition, such as the work of Irad Malkin, has employed post-colonial theories to the epic in order to understand better the cultural dynamics of the society that produced it, and the poem's subsequent influence on that society. This theoretical approach has provided a more textured understanding of how multi-cultural encounters shaped the formation of the Homeric corpus, and how, in turn, epic poetry helped Archaic Greeks to mediate the unsettling intercultural encounters inherent in ancient commerce, diplomacy, and warfare. Malkin's work supports a view of the ancient Mediterranean that places Greek identity in the midst of an "intricate, sometimes hybrid, mutually reflecting world of exploration, contacts, colonization, and coexistence."¹

However, though Malkin's work presents valuable new insights about archaic Greek ethnicity and colonial expansion, he draws most of his material from sources outside of the *Odyssey* itself, preferring to apply his approach to stories of colonization, which occur after Odysseus' return to Ithaka. Though these stories provide useful information about Greek colonization in actual places such as Epirus and Italy, Malkin's theoretical approach can provide a broader, more basic picture of Greek interaction with foreign entities if applied to the *Odyssey* itself.

The *Odyssey* mentions non-Greek historical cultures by name, but representatives from those cultures are absent from the sea which stands between Odysseus and his home. However, though no mention is made of an encounter with any particular foreign

¹ Malkin (1998): xi.

civilization during Odysseus' wandering,² in light of Malkin's theories, Odysseus' long struggle with the monstrous inhabitants of the sea can be read as a mythically conceptualized description of traumatic interethnic encounters.

The monsters, gods, and sea-creatures that Odysseus encounters, representatives of the sea and tangible embodiments of the sea's polymorphous and chaotic nature, reveal the threat that Odysseus faces, not death, necessarily (though death is certainly threatened as well), but the loss of his cultural identity through his incorporation into their monstrous ranks. In order to succeed in his return to Ithaka, Odysseus must find a way to interact with the sea's monsters that allows him to pass by them but prevents them from identifying and attacking those qualities that mark him as foreign. He achieves this by accommodating the sea's chaos with a polymorphous persona, sublimating his identity as an Achaean warrior king and finding ways to blend in temporarily with the monstrous representatives of sea, passing unnoticed among them.

Though this strategy allows Odysseus to succeed, the trauma of mitigating his cultural identity in such an extreme manner removes Odysseus from his humanity. Nausikaa and the Phaiakians ultimately restore him to human society in a process that restores the trappings of culture to him one by one. Finally, fully restored to a place within a functioning society, he can reclaim his identity.

By describing this chaos using myth, and showing how Odysseus was able to prevail against it, the *Odyssey* helped to mediate the fears and experiences of its archaic Greek audience.

² References to encounters with Phoenicians, Cretans, and Egyptians are, of course, made when Odysseus is back in Ithaka, a topic which I hope to explore in a continuation of this project. For references to actual foreign cultures, see *Od.* 14.192-359, *etc.*

In this study, I will employ Malkin's theoretical apparatus and the work of other scholars in order to understand how the sea in Books IX-XII of the *Odyssey* conceptualizes the trauma and chaos of intercultural contact and what strategies allow Odysseus to successfully traverse such a chaotic landscape.

I. Theoretical Approaches to Homeric Myth

Myth as a Conduit for Experience

Irad Malkin, in "Postcolonial Concepts and Ancient Greek Colonization," and *Returns of Odysseus*, provides the impetus for a student to consider ancient myth in light of its historical and cultural context, as well as the theoretical apparatus to pursue that goal. He argues that ethnographic myth, such as the *Odyssey* or the other epics relating the return of heroes from the Trojan War, must both inform and be informed by the attendant historical record:

The *nostoi* mediated and informed cultural, ethnic, and political encounters among Greeks, in relation to non-Greeks, and in the relations of non-Greeks to Greeks. A[n] historian of myth may wish to take such encounters into consideration, since mythic representations were informed by them; conversely, historians of events and hard facts will see that myth is more important than more conventional data precisely in their domain. (Malkin (1998): 7)

Malkin conceives of epic myth as representative of particular experiences from the society that produced it at the same time as it actively influences cultural perceptions of new experiences.

Malkin has specifically analyzed Homeric myth, particularly the Odyssean tradition, in order to better understand the interplay between culture, ethnic identity, and imagination in archaic Greece. He argues that one of the functions of myth is that it helps conceptualize cultural identity for participants and allows them to come to terms with cultural difference:

The question ... is how myths, especially what we know as Greek myths of the returns of Odysseus and other heroes, were used to mediate encounters and conceptualize ethnicity and group identity in the Archaic and Classical periods. The issue relates less to a binary model of Greeks and Others than to the intricate, sometimes hybrid, mutually reflecting world of exploration, contacts, colonization, and coexistence involving various Greeks and native populations ...

Odysseus of the *Odyssey* ... looms large ... as a protocolonial, exploratory hero...
(Malkin (1998): xi)

This approach, informed by his use of postcolonial theoretical apparatus, particularly Richard White's "Middle Ground," indicates that archaic Greece may have been much less homogenous and xenophobic than other models of the period claim. Malkin does not promote the concept that a monolithic Greek identity, in an unbroken chain of cultural succession from the Mycenaean civilization to Classical Greece, stretches back through the centuries, uninfluenced by surrounding cultures. He instead proposes that Greek ethnic identity was formed in response to a series of interactions within a network of cultural connections, both among Greek city-states and foreign entities.³ He further claims that an emergent, even young Greek ethnic identity informs the "Greekness" displayed in the Homeric epics. Those epics, Malkin argues, in particular the stories about Odysseus, mediate the traumatic but commonplace intercultural exchanges of the Archaic Age Mediterranean into a form that Greeks could use both to understand the world around them and to reinforce elements of their own emergent cultural identity.

Malkin's ideas about the function of myth are useful to my study in that they provide a theoretical framework within which to understand how the *Odyssey's* chaotic sea reflects the prospect of cultural ambiguity and hybridity, troubling historical realities for ancient Greek seafarers. Further, I will use his approach to understand how Odysseus' methods of surviving his journey through the sea both conceptualize and inform Greek strategies for coping with the trauma inherent in intercultural exchange. I hope that this work, informed by the approach of Malkin and other theorists, will add to the

³ Malkin (2004): 359.

understanding of how Homeric epic serves as a mediator for cultural contact in the archaic Greek world.

Greek Identity and a Mediterranean Network

Malkin's book *Returns of Odysseus* shows how the mythical tradition surrounding Odysseus functioned as an intercultural medium, providing not only the Greeks with a conceptualized understanding of cultural encounters, but a compelling framework within which non-Greeks might couch their experiences as well. While the specifics of this situation are beyond the scope of my work, the general implications are quite cogent in that they speak to Malkin's model of intercultural relations on the archaic Mediterranean. Malkin's claim that various stories about Odysseus resonated with a wider audience than Greeks alone fits in with his theory that a "middle ground" existed among the cultures living along the Mediterranean at that time; a loose, multi-ethnic network of societies that engaged in mutual literary and cultural exchange as well as economic trade:⁴

In contrast to the colonizers of the New World, the ancient Greeks did not perceive the lands they reached as inhabited by "absolute others". The more distant parts of the Mediterranean were not a "New World" to them; they were more of the same, with familiar geographic and climatic features. Maritime trade, exploration, and colonization were conducted not across an alien ocean but along contiguous coastlines or toward observable lands. (Malkin (2004): 348)

Malkin argues that the shared use of these coastlines and trade routes, marked by a geographic sameness rather than difference, bred a familiarity between the various societies that populated the Mediterranean at the time, Greeks included. This familiarity, Malkin claims, coupled with the knowledge that one could expect to meet and deal with Phoenicians, Egyptians, Cretans, and Etruscans while travelling, led ancient travelers to interact with one another in a way that took into account pre-existing knowledge of the

⁴ Malkin (1998): 5.

various cultures which populated the Mediterranean. Trade routes would have been passed from generation to generation, as well as constantly updated information about the cultural practices of the people who dwelt along those routes. All the societies involved in the network would be conducting themselves with the practices of the other societies in mind. Prolonged contact and expansion therefore resulted in a kind of *de facto* shared culture, with unwritten but understood rules for navigating the diverse cultural networks of the ancient Mediterranean. Malkin describes this state, directed by no one political power but by the necessity for communication, as a “Middle Ground”:

The Middle ground is a field in which each side plays a role dictated by what it perceives as the other's perception of it, resulting from the mutual misrepresentation of values and practices. In time this role-playing, the outcome of "creative misunderstandings"- a kind of double mirror reflection- creates a "third" civilization that is neither purely native nor entirely imported by the colonizer. (Malkin (2004): 357)

The notion of a “Middle Ground” is a theoretical construct invented by historian Richard White to understand the dynamic that existed between European settlers and various indigenous tribes in North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the absence of any kind of unified political power in some remote regions, a complex web of relationships was formed through constant cultural contact between European settlers, trappers and traders, and Native American tribes.⁵ Malkin proposes that the intercultural connections of the archaic Mediterranean are particularly apt to be understood as a “Middle Ground”:

The concept of Middle Ground is appealing in the Mediterranean, where there was no empire to dictate anything (until Rome and its *mare nostrum*). The Mediterranean also forces us to see the "Greeks versus natives" problem in terms of "networks of exchange" rather than as if one culture poured itself from its own overflowing cups into the empty containers of the receiving culture. (Malkin (2004): 358)

⁵ White (1991).

With the absence of a centralized, policy-enforcing governing body over the ancient Mediterranean, then, this “Middle Ground” emerged, and communication along “networks of exchange,” the pre-existing trade routes and points of intercultural contact, continued through the medium of a new mutually intelligible culture that sprang out of interactions between all the involved groups.

In the process of showing how cultural networks in the archaic Mediterranean formed a “Middle Ground,” Malkin also describes how elements within Greek myth speak to this phenomenon. Malkin’s work is helpful in its treatment of myth as means by which a culture conceptualizes and mediates experiences. His approach towards myth allows him to examine how the Greeks understood and represented the “Middle Ground” situation:

Their [*i.e.*, the myths of the heroes returning from Troy] main figures were heroes living long ago in never-never land, but with exploration, contact, and settlement they came to be superimposed onto ethnic identities and territories. The reality of sailing experiences, trade, guest-friendships, raids and colonization influenced the selection of and emphasis on evocative themes and myths. (Malkin (1998): 7)

Malkin further argues that the mythic figures in the Greek tradition most suited to bear special emphasis on these themes are the various Achaean warriors whose stories show them returning home from the Trojan War.⁶ Even more specifically, however, Malkin finds reference to the themes of “sailing experiences, trade, guest-friendships, raids, and colonization” most prominently featured in the stories surrounding just one of the many returning heroes, Odysseus:

The return of Odysseus to Ithaca must be seen as markedly different from most return stories, and this difference will prove significant for the way in which the various Odysseus myths articulated exploration, contact with non-Greeks, ethnic definitions, trade, and colonization...What Odysseus reflects is the ambivalence

⁶ Malkin (1998): 1.

implied in exploration and protocolonization: hope of discovering a magnificently rich land mixed with fear that its inhabitants might be Cyclopes. (Malkin (1998): 4)

Obviously, Odysseus might present the most appealing subject for scholars studying the return stories of the Achaeans simply because such a great part of Odysseus' homecoming cycle survives in the form of the *Odyssey*. Beyond the attendant wealth of material, however, Malkin is interested in the cycle of stories surrounding Odysseus because they provide key insights into what he sees as emergent Greek "protocolonization".

For Malkin, the journeys of Odysseus do not speak to the processes of actual colonization: conquest, permanent settlement, and the foundation of a new city under the auspices of a mother *polis*. The heroes returning from Troy who are colonizers found their cities and never return home.⁷ Instead, Malkin sees Odysseus as a protocolonial hero, whose adventures speak to a time that precedes colonization; he is a traveler who prefigures the settlers of the other return stories. Odysseus' tales are marked by wandering through uncharted seas, exploration of the unknown, and first contact with terrifying natives, some of the necessary steps before proper colonies can be established. Perhaps most importantly, Odysseus' experiences speak to the "ambivalence" inherent in the whole process: frightening in its randomness, but heartening in the fact of Odysseus' success.

Odysseus, then, stands on the boundary of what is known and what is totally alien, testing the waters for later, focused programs of expansion, and showing later explorers how to succeed. Just as an actual frontiersman might provide vital knowledge for subsequent settlers, Malkin seems to suggest that the tales of Odysseus paved the way

⁷ Malkin (1998): 4.

to colonization in the imaginations of increasingly expansion-minded Greeks in the ninth and eighth centuries.

Malkin treats these myths of Odysseus and other heroes as stories that are abstractly informed by actual events and experiences surrounding the time of their creation. He also claims that such myths allow subsequent members of that society to mediate new experiences through the lens of heroic deeds, thus influencing the very culture that produced them:

The question raised in this book is how myths of Odysseus and other Nostoi were used to mediate encounters and conceptualize ethnicity and group identity and how such conceptualizations functioned historically, especially in the Archaic period. What matters here is the "active" role of myth in filtering, shaping, and mediating cultural and ethnic encounters... This question thus comprehends Greek views of non-Greeks [and] Greek views of other Greeks... (Malkin (1998): 5)

According to Malkin, examining how return myths, particularly the Odyssean cycle, conceptualize intercultural encounters is vital to an understanding of how a relatively young Greek ethnic identity placed itself within a Mediterranean "Middle Ground". Not only do stories about Odysseus reveal archaic Greek notions about travel and cultural contact, they also actively influenced the shape that intercultural encounters took. My study will examine Odysseus' wandering and the creatures he encounters in Books IX-XII in light of Malkin's theories of myth as a highly conceptualized medium for describing intercultural contact.

Boundaries and Ethnic Identity

While Malkin's theoretical framework provides both a method for examining archaic polyethnic, multicultural exchange through the lens of ancient Greek myth and an impetus to examine the subject as well, his work focuses mainly on extra-Homeric

sources.⁸ Unlike the sites of hero-worship and colonization that Malkin studies, the descriptions of the sea within the wanderings of Odysseus in Books IX-XII of the *Odyssey* are usually not attached to actual locations. In addition to this, Odysseus has a complex, ambiguous, and often tenuous relationship with his own cultural identity during his return to Ithaka which falls largely outside of Malkin's purview. It is necessary to consult the theoretical work of other scholars in order to address these issues.

The work of a scholar from a different field, anthropologist Frederick Barth, can provide a way to understand why Odysseus adopts such a fluid identity while he is at sea, and how, once he has begun this process, he might hope to reassume his original cultural identity. Barth's broad theories about how ethnic identity can be abandoned and reassumed speak to conditions within the Homeric sea and Odysseus' interaction with it within the *Odyssey*. Barth's observations about boundaries, border regions, and the ability of a traveler to adapt his or her ethnic identity in order to traverse such areas helps to explain how opportunities to change and subdue ethnic identity are conceptualized on the Homeric sea, an archetypal, imaginary border region.

Barth, in his introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*, addresses issues relating to the persistence of ethnic identity along cultural boundaries. Barth uses modern examples to illustrate his points, but his argument is not specific to any one time period or society, and so can provide a useful theoretical framework for the student of ancient culture as well. While a scholar of the ancient world is not able to engage in the type of first-hand observation that Barth does, his theories on the resilience of ethnic identity under culturally trying circumstances

⁸ Malkin (1998).

may be used to understand elements of ancient literature and reconcile them with seemingly contradictory aspects of the historical record.

Barth conceives of ethnic identity as a social imperative that "...implies a series of constraints on the kinds of roles an individual is allowed to play, and the partners he may choose for different kinds of transactions..." much as sex and rank do within a society.⁹ Although these behavioral traits are tightly constrained, Barth claims that when elements of an ethnic identity doom a person to failure in a particular situation, that person will adopt whatever available alternative identities allow them to succeed:

Since ethnic identity is associated with a culturally specific set of value standards, it follows that there are circumstances where such an identity can be moderately successfully realized and limits beyond which such success is precluded. I will argue that ethnic identities will not be retained beyond these limits, because allegiance to basic value standards will not be sustained where one's own comparative performance is utterly inadequate. The two components in this relative measure of success are, first the performance of others and, secondly, the alternatives open to oneself...What matters is how well the others, with whom one interacts and to whom one is compared, manage to perform, and what alternative identities and sets of standards are available to the individual. (Barth (1998): 25)

Despite this attrition of agents away from an ethnic identity, the parameters of the identity will remain unchanged, and one might re-adopt an abandoned ethnic identity when conditions for success therein seem more favorable. In this and other issues he addresses, Barth tends towards the notion that people are more ethnically and culturally mobile than previous views of ethnicity have indicated.¹⁰

Barth also challenges the idea that ethnic identities have been formed or maintained in a vacuum. He rejects the "simplistic view that geographical and social isolation have been the critical factors in sustaining cultural diversity."¹¹ For Barth, a

⁹ Barth (1998): 17.

¹⁰ Barth (1998): 25.

¹¹ Barth (1998): 15.

group's ethnic identity can not only survive contact with members of another group, but actually *needs* such contact to exist in the first place:

One has tended to think in terms of different peoples, with different histories and cultures, coming together and accommodating themselves to each other, generally in a colonial setting. To visualize the basic requirements for the coexistence of ethnic diversity, I would suggest that we rather ask ourselves what is needed to make ethnic distinctions *emerge* in an area. (Barth (1998): 17)

This point of view about how ethnic distinctions emerge and are maintained, that is, through contact with and reaction to different cultures, echoes Malkin's theories about the emergence of Greek ethnic identity in reaction to the loose, interethnic network of pan-Mediterranean relationships of which they were a part.

In the same way that ethnic identities persist through culturally trying times, Barth claims that so too do the boundaries which have been created to maintain cultural division. Again, Barth favors a view that accounts for high human mobility, especially through the border regions that these imagined boundaries create:

First, it is clear that boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them. In other words, categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, persisting cultural differences. Yet where persons of different culture interact, one would expect these differences to be reduced, since interaction both requires and generates a congruence of codes and values ... a similarity or community of culture... (Barth (1998): 15)

Barth's "congruence of codes and values" suggests the type of opportunities that present themselves to the many people who, for whatever reason, cross the boundaries which separate their culture from another one. Barth's theory assumes that people, regardless of ethnic identity, will engage in interactions which are profitable for them. Therefore, when agents of different cultures interact with one another, a third, mutually intelligible culture will be formed, with, as Barth says, a reduction of difference and a framework for

interaction based on whatever similarities exist between the two. This new culture will have its own attendant identities and roles into which the participants can move.

Constraining and persistent though ethnic identity may be, movement through or near boundaries provides a greatly increased variety of alternative identities that one might adopt in order to achieve success. Though cultural boundaries are imposed and enforced in order to maintain difference, their very existence turns that difference into a commodity and at the same time creates the marketplace where that commodity may be capitalized upon. Barth addresses the unique intercultural opportunities to be had while passing through boundary regions in a much later essay, "Boundaries and Connections".

In "Boundaries and Connections," Barth explains the parameters that govern intercultural exchange. He argues that the establishment of a boundary simply invites people to conceive of new ways to interact with the other side. This reconnection of whatever the boundary has severed generally springs from two types of human response:

Human activities perversely create ... leakages through conceptual boundaries by reconnecting what has been separated. They arise above all from two sources: inventive behavioural responses to the imposition of boundaries, and the effects of social positioning. (Barth (2000): 28)

These leakages of human activity are instances of interaction with whoever lies on the other side of an established boundary. Barth calls the creation of these leakages perverse because they would lack any significance if the boundary had not been established. In a sense, some boundaries are created specifically so that they can be transgressed.

The first source of leakage is what Barth calls inventive behavioral response, which allows people to use the boundary in order to engender positive interaction with the other side:

For a simple illustration of the former, reflect for a moment on the scene of two English neighbours, conversing over a garden fence. The territorial boundary of their properties separates them but it gives shape to their interaction in a way that I suspect positively enables it, since it frames and defines the nature of the opportunity. (Barth (2000): 28)

Boundaries, despite their apparent permeability, can provide a measure of security that would not exist in their absence, allowing those whom the boundary separates to be more comfortable with one another out of their sense of safety. The boundary is being acknowledged and cross-boundary interaction achieved, but in such a way that the boundary is positively reinforced.

The other source of leakage, what I will attempt to treat, is the more insidious social positioning:

"But if we also introduce social positioning into our analysis of boundaries, a veritable Pandora's box of social and cognitive inventiveness is opened. Often one will find that while some do the boundary imposing, others look for loopholes. Thus separation may be what the national regime sees when imposing boundaries, but that is not how it looks to the potential smuggler: his or her pragmatic view of the outcome of national boundaries focuses on the disparity of price, value and availability...and the opportunities thereby granted." (Barth (2000): 28)

A boundary may be intended as a deterrent to mobility, but the very fact of its existence means that the goods on one side are not as readily available to people living on the other side, and vice versa. So, although the boundary has ostensibly been created in order to limit traffic across a border, what really has been accomplished through its creation is that a market for flow across the region exists where there was none before. Those who wish to advance their social position will cross the boundary in order to sell or procure goods rendered more valuable only by the boundary's imposition. Where some see deterrent from movement, others see that they will profit if they increase their own movement.

Odysseus is representative of this second category. His travels to the uttermost boundaries of human experience upon the sea are indeed dangerous, and he must, as Barth says, adopt a new identity in order to succeed. However, the potential for profit that he encounters upon the sea is enormous. Despite the immense danger contained within the sea, the *Odyssey* shows that it presents many lucrative opportunities for a traveler such as Odysseus.

Finally, Barth explains that, although such leakages across ethnic boundaries are so pervasive, this constant flow of personnel through a society is necessarily not represented in that society's literature:

Examples of stable and persisting ethnic boundaries that are crossed by a flow of personnel are clearly far more common than the ethnographic literature would lead us to believe. (Barth (1998): 21)

This is clearly the case in the *Odyssey*. Though mention is made of the many cultural groups with whom the Greeks shared the ancient Mediterranean, the sea which Odysseus encounters is basically free of explicit evidence that actual foreign cultures such as the Phoenicians or the Cretans are a presence upon it. If encounters with these foreign entities are reflected, they will be portrayed in an abstracted, conceptualized way free of explicit reference to actual cultures or locations. I will explore how these conceptualized encounters are represented within the *Odyssey* in later chapters.

Barth provides an explanation for why ethnographic literature is free of references to actual incidents of intercultural exchange:

People's own experience of a cultural contrast to members of other groups is schematized by drawing an ethnic boundary, imposing a false conceptual order on a field of much more broadly distributed cultural variation. (Barth (2000): 30)

Barth seems to be saying that people tend to reduce and simplify cultural difference when they encounter it. By projecting order onto a troubling experience, people can deal with it more easily. This imposition of conceptual order upon cultural difference is not much different than the conceptualizing of experiences that Malkin sees as function of myth. Perhaps ethnographic literature is so unrepresentative of the constant flow of culturally different personnel because those experiences have been imposed with the “false conceptual order” that Barth mentions, but on a societal, rather than individual level. If this is the case, then the monsters in the *Odyssey* can be viewed as the conceptualized trauma of intercultural exchange given an ordered, more manageable form.

The Sea as Cultural Chaos

As Barth claims, ethnographic literature fails to represent the existence of multi-cultural elements within the ethnicity that it describes, whether those elements are foreign personnel or outside cultural influence. Ethnographic literature, such as Homeric epic, does not accurately reflect either the volume or the nature of the flow of culturally diverse agents through border regions.¹² However, though intercultural interaction may not be prominent in ethnographic literature, if the phenomenon of constant intercultural exchange is so widespread, its effect must not be wholly absent from ethnography.

The border regions that Barth describes are physical landscapes upon which occurs a constant flow of cultural exchange. Much like the experience of intercultural contact itself, the border landscapes upon which the contact takes place can also be conceptualized and then reproduced within a society’s literature. The imagined intercultural exchange, then, takes place on an imagined landscape. Just as the actual

¹² Barth (1998): 21.

experiences of multicultural contact become abstracted in the ethnographic literature, so too can the landscape upon which it occurs. A literary landscape, such as the sea in the *Odyssey*, can have multivalent significance. An imagined, abstracted landscape can retain the physical features of the actual region it represents (the sea in the *Odyssey*, for example, is still blue, salty, and made of water) but might at the same time symbolically represent some aspect of the exchange which takes place upon it. The conceptualized landscape would embody both the dangers and potential benefits available to those who attempted to navigate it, a unit of cultural knowledge which either warns, encourages, or both.

A prime example of the literary conceptualization of landscapes upon which intercultural connections occur is the sea in Homer's *Odyssey*. The sea in the *Odyssey* is not simply a literal body of water that lies between Odysseus and his home. Rather, it is an area throughout which contact between civilization and savagery, divinities and mortals, even the living and the dead, is possible. It is the borderland between an idealized Greek ethnic identity and chaotic cultural unpredictability. At one end of the sea, Ithaca invites Odysseus to return, a place that Odysseus remembers as comfortable and familiar, where the rules that allow Odysseus to navigate life as a member of a community are commonly known. On the other hand, the sea sweeps around the shores of far-off islands, marking the frontiers beyond which lie hybrid beastmen who care nothing for the laws of gods or men and the monsters of the deep. These hybrid monsters represent the internalized fear of encounters with unknown cultural entities re-imagined and played out to their furthest extreme. The sea is a border region, a culturally porous area where each of the cultures it touches has a presence. In epic myth, those cultural

differences are re-imagined and distorted, given an idealized or terrifying aspect. The sea is the medium through which Odysseus' contact with inhumanity and lawlessness takes place.

Many characteristics of the sea in the *Odyssey* are, of course, those of an actual sea; it is a real place, full of tangible and easily understood dangers. Odysseus, however, does not seem to be overly concerned with drowning or shipwrecks, except incidentally. Rather, Odysseus seems afraid of losing himself at sea, afraid of forgetting his identity and his past, thereby yielding to the temptation of joining with the otherness he encounters. The danger for him is not death, but that during the course of his journey he will change so much that he no longer seeks a homecoming, content instead to abide as Nausikaa's husband on Scheria, or as Calypso's lover on Ogygia. Thus the sea, which, as an historical body of water, no doubt destroyed many ancient vessels and seafarers, is portrayed in the poem as an imaginary landscape which threatens to destroy the young, tenuous ethnic identity Odysseus possesses.

Though the sea in the *Odyssey* is a constant and unpredictable danger to Odysseus, his travel across this border region cannot be avoided, and, in fact, is the necessary component of his success in several instances. He must travel to the underworld in order to receive information and advice that allow him to return home successfully. Calypso provides him with materials for a raft and instructions on how to proceed; Ino, with magical protection during his final storm; and the Phaiakians, with a final voyage and the riches that signify a worthwhile trip. For Odysseus, then, travel upon the sea is a necessary evil. He must maintain his identity while he strives to attain the things that will make his name renowned and his journey successful.

Donald H. Mills, in his book *The Hero and the Sea: Patterns of Chaos in Ancient Myth*, analyzes Odysseus' interaction with the sea in great detail. His book seeks to examine the reoccurring theme of struggle between order and chaos in ancient mythology, particularly when that struggle takes the form of a ritualized encounter between a culture hero and a body of water. Though he does not attempt to address the possibility of multi-cultural relationships between his subjects, the scope of his book includes examples of watery struggle from Mesopotamian, Greek, and Hebrew myths.¹³ His treatment of the sea in the *Odyssey* as a mythological representation of chaos provides a useful starting point for a study of the monsters therein.

Mills considers all ancient myth to have had some ritualistic application in the culture which produced it. For Mills, ritual is "...a community's attempt, through regularized, stereotypical, and measured acts, to create order in a disorderly and unpredictable world."¹⁴ Additionally, Mills adopts the view of Arnold van Gennep that rituals exist in order to allow the transformation of social status, thus leading participants in the ritual to sever ties with their previous social state in anticipation of the ritual's conclusion and their entrance into whatever new identity the ritual allows. While the ritual is being performed, however, the participant occupies a kind of social limbo, a liminal state.¹⁵ For Mills, struggles between heroes and chaos, represented by bodies of water, allow societies to deal with the uncertainty of this ritualistic liminality and foreshadows the reinforcement of social order that the successful completion of the ritual will bring:

¹³ Mills (2002): i.

¹⁴ Mills (2002): 7.

¹⁵ Mills (2002): 8.

Ancient stories of heroic conflict with watery chaos involve significant changes in the hero's social orientation and connections. Moreover, those changes are patterned, as will be seen in the following chapters, on ritual movement into and out of liminality. Although the heroic struggle with the chaotic is often solitary and individual, the ancient storytellers invested their tales, either consciously or unconsciously, with far-reaching societal implications. For such liminal movement is motivated by the attempt of traditional societies to confront the chaotic in their natural and social realms. (Mills (2002): 11)

So, in order to confront chaos (represented by water in the myths that Mills treats) and reinforce societal order, the hero must be able to move through the liminal areas that chaos inhabits, and to do that, he must, at least temporarily, bear a socially ambiguous status himself.

This point of view, though framed within an analysis of myth rather than social anthropology, works well with Barth's ideas about the opportunities that are created by the imposition of a boundary.¹⁶ Both scholars seem to think that movement through culturally ambiguous areas affords the traveler significant opportunities in addition to danger and fear. Barth's point of view is that the original ethnic identity of a person who adopts a new identity in order to travel across a boundary will persist until it becomes profitable for that person to reassume it.¹⁷ Mills goes one step further. He suggests that movement away from an established social role into an ambiguous cultural position by an individual is, from time to time, actually necessary to the survival of that individual's society.

In spite of the apparent compatibility of Barth's and Mills' approaches to identity, one key point must be clarified. Barth claims that an abandoned ethnic identity will persist so that it can be reclaimed by the person who abandoned it. However, he does not talk about whether or not that person will approach his or her reassumed ethnic identity in

¹⁶ Barth (2000): 28.

¹⁷ Barth (1998): 25.

the same way they did before they abandoned it. Mills seems to imply that, though an individual can return to an abandoned social role, they will have been changed by their encounter with ambiguity. Mills posits that certain threats must be conquered on their own ground. His analysis of Odysseus and other heroes shows that only someone detached from an established social role can possibly experience the level of chaos which must be overcome in order to make its conquest meaningful. Then, when the hero is reintegrated into the group during the completion of a commonly held ritual, his personal success becomes the victory of the society at large, and order is reinforced. As for the hero himself, though he returns to an established societal role, he returns better equipped to perform it. His immersion in cultural chaos has allowed him to experience and understand the nature of the dangers that threaten his society, but his victory over that chaos has provided him with the tools to successfully face those dangers.

Both the location and embodiment of the chaos with which Mills' hero must struggle is the sea. The sea for Mills is the region where chaos tears away at a hero's resolve and identity. Travel upon it represents separation from what is known and a forced dialogue with what is foreign; it is a literary example of Barth's boundary. In his treatment of Odysseus, Mills focuses on the themes of death and rebirth, keeping with his interest in the ritual aspects of Odysseus' struggle.¹⁸ While it is beyond the scope of this project to analyze all of the specific elements of Mills' analysis, his work is quite useful in that it shows how the sea in the *Odyssey* is characterized as an embodiment of unpredictability and chaos.

Mills most explicitly deals with this personification of chaos in his description of the three storms which Odysseus must endure in the *Odyssey*. The two that occur first in

¹⁸ Mills (2002): 108, 111, *etc.*

Odysseus' timeline come later in the book, related during his tale to the Phaiakians; both are sent by Zeus, first in Book IX after Odysseus' brutal attack on the Kikonians of Ismaros, then in Book XII after Odysseus' men eat the cattle of Helios. The third storm, chronologically the final, but first within the poem's narrative, is sent by Poseidon to punish Odysseus for blinding his son Polyphemus, and is described in Book V. This final storm is Odysseus' last ordeal before arriving safely at Scheria into the hospitality of the Phaiakians, and is also the most terrible.

Mills, after a translation of the accounts all three storms, offers the following analysis about the chaos represented within:

All three storms also paint a vivid picture of violent and chaotic nature. We note the liminal symbolism: Odysseus' ship and later his raft spin out of control; the hero finds it necessary to drop the tiller, thus losing any further hope of controlling the course of his vessel ... the consequences of the liminal strife are brought out by the destruction of the vessel, and in particular, those parts of it that provide motion and direction. The mast is snapped in two: sails are shredded; the tiller is wrenched from his hands. The common element in all these descriptions, then, is the loss of one's bearings, the loss of control, and the sense of utter helplessness in the sea's violent onslaught. (Mills (2002): 105)

Mills understands the destruction wrought by the storms as a representation of chaos that threatens to destroy the order of human culture, in the form of Odysseus, his men, and the various vessels he uses. The sea represents chaos that threatens to destroy not only Odysseus' life, but his cultural identity as well.

This chaos and unpredictability that Mills describes is also manifested in the form of the monsters, shape-shifters, and hybrids described in the *Odyssey*. In many ways, an examination of sea monsters in early Greek myth is vital to understanding how the archaic Greeks viewed the sea. Sea monsters are often anthropomorphized aspects of the sea itself, or the offspring of these aquatic deities. Further, ancient myth seems to project

anxieties about the sea and sea travel upon these monsters, as if to give perceived dangers terrifying and cautionary forms. At the same time, however, representations of sea monsters in the *Odyssey* corral the shapeless fears associated with a chaotic sea into limited, tangible forms. These forms may be daunting, but once an abstract emotional response has been fettered with anthropomorphized traits and limitations, it can be examined, understood, and perhaps overcome.

II. Proteus and the Sea

Menelaus' Little *Odyssey*

The strongest example in the *Odyssey* that sea monsters somehow embody the sea itself comes not from Odysseus' travels but from Menelaus' account to Telemachus of his encounter with Proteus in Book IV. Proteus, Old Man of the Sea and herder of seals, seems to be linked to the sea so closely that knowledge of all the things that happen in the deep are in his purview and his very approach dredges up the sour smell of the briny depths. Proteus also physically personifies the sea's chaotic unpredictability with his wild shape-changing arts.

On a symbolic level, the successful negotiation with Proteus represents a barrier to Menelaus' safe homecoming similar to the one that Odysseus faces in the actual sea. The negotiation of both Proteus and the sea itself represent undertakings of extreme danger and hardship laced with incredible rewards. In fact, Menelaus' encounter with Proteus contains many of the same elements that Odysseus' wanderings do, though in a greatly condensed form. The examination of the tale of Proteus as an embedded simile for the larger narrative of Odysseus' travels will show that Proteus stands in for the sea in Menelaus' compact *nostos*. As an entity that represents the sea, the details of Proteus' person will show some of the fears and rewards that sea travel carries for an ancient hero.

Menelaus' story about his encounter with Proteus, embedded within the broader narrative, precedes and foreshadows the monster-plagued wandering that Odysseus describes to the Phaiakians in Books IX-XII. Menelaus' tale, though composed of only a single episode, parallels Odysseus' multiple encounters, distilling the many dangers that Odysseus faces on the sea into the multi-shaped person of Proteus. Menelaus is able to

conquer Proteus by the same factors that allow Odysseus to overcome the boundary of the sea; advice from divine agents, trickery with regards to his own identity, and tenacious endurance in the face of incomprehensible developments. This entire episode resonates with Odysseus' later tale and reveals how a monster might represent the sea itself.

Menelaus begins his story *in medias res* at a point in his travels when he and his men have been stuck on an island near Egypt for twenty days, unable to move on because of windless skies. In the very next book, Book V, the reader is shown Odysseus for the first time and sees that he too is grieved to have been stuck in one place for a long time - Calypso's island, and for seven years instead of twenty days. The much shorter length of time that Menelaus must spend on Pharos is indicative of the way that Menelaus' ordeal compactly parallels that of Odysseus.

The episode begins when all of his men are out fishing and Menelaus is approached by the goddess Eidothea, daughter of Proteus. Eidothea tells Menelaus that the key to his return to Sparta lies with her father, Proteus:¹⁹

The ever truthful Old Man of the Sea ranges in these parts. This is the Egyptian, Proteus, and he knows all the depths of the sea ... If somehow you could lie in ambush and catch hold of him, he could tell you the way to go, the stages of your journey, and tell you how to make your way home on the sea where the fish swarm. And he could tell you too, illustrious one, if you wish it, what evil and what good has been done in your palace while you have been gone away on your long and arduous voyage. (*Od.* 4.384-393)

Proteus is marked both as wild and difficult to control, and as a custodian of necessary knowledge. He governs two types of information, first, the means of return, and secondly, crucial news from Menelaus' homeland and companions. Both of these pieces of information are known to Proteus because of his intense connection with the sea.

¹⁹ *Od.* 4.363-367.

Like Odysseus, Menelaus not only needs to know how to get home, but also the situation into which he will return. To Odysseus the details of his return and the state of his kingdom come slowly, from a variety of sources, each reached by their own journey within his wanderings.²⁰ Proteus, however, holds all knowledge of both the sea and the goings-on upon it, and Menelaus gains in one successful encounter what it takes Odysseus years to discover. The basic premise is the same, though; both heroes face an entity unconquerable except by divine aid, the conquest of which will provide knowledge necessary for their return journey.

Also like Odysseus, Menelaus requires the aid of a benevolent goddess to succeed against unfriendly divine forces. Just as Eidothea appears to Menelaus in his hour of greatest need, unprompted by any action of Menelaus, so too does Leukothea miraculously come to Odysseus in the very nick of time as he faces obliteration by Poseidon's storm.²¹ Both goddesses provide aid that includes divine insight. Menelaus would never even have guessed at Proteus' existence without Eidothea, let alone known that Proteus could provide the key to his departure from Egypt or how to capture the wily god. By the same token, the poem makes clear that Odysseus would surely have perished without Leukothea's divine veil and her orders to remove his clothing, abandon his ship, and swim for Scheria. A final parallel: both heroes suffer for the same period of time before being liberated from peril by the advice of their respective goddesses. Menelaus and his men are stranded on the island of Pharos for twenty days and about to run out of food when Eidothea comes to him. Odysseus sails for eighteen days on his raft, then

²⁰ First Aeolus provides a fast journey home, though it is undone by Odysseus' men, and then Odysseus must get necessary information from Circe, Teiresias, Calypso, Leukothea, and finally Athena.

²¹ *Od.* 5.333-339.

receives Leukothea's veil just as his raft is totally destroyed, and swims for two more days until he reaches land: a total of twenty days.²²

Besides being the recipients of divine aid, both Menelaus and Odysseus must use trickery to overcome the dangers they each face. More specifically, each must disguise his own identity, temporarily becoming more like the sea creatures that stand in their way.

For Odysseus to use trickery, or δόλοι, is hardly remarkable, after all, two of his most common epithets are πολύτροπος and πολύμητις, man of many turns and man of many wiles. Odysseus' tricky cleverness is his best known trait, so naturally he uses tricks and disguises many times throughout the *Odyssey*. Menelaus, on the other hand, is not known for his wits or his use of δόλοι at any other time. Here, though, under the guidance of Eidothea, he takes part in a trick worthy of Odysseus:

Meanwhile she had dived down into the sea's great cavern and brought back the skins of four seals out of the water. All were newly skinned. She was planning a trick on her father. And hollowing out four beds in the sand of the sea, she sat there waiting for us, and we came close to here. Thereupon she ... spread a skin over each man. That was a most awful ambush, for the pernicious smell of those seals, bred in the salt water, oppressed us terribly. Who would want to lie down to sleep by a sea-bred monster? (*Od.* 4.435-443)

Covered with the skins of the seals and lying down among them, Menelaus and his men have, at least symbolically, become like sea creatures themselves in order to capture their polymorphous prey. Lying still, surrounded by seals and the stench of the sea, Menelaus has temporarily detached himself from his identity as an Achaean warrior-king. Were he to face Proteus head on, which might be the inclination of his Iliadic persona - Menelaus

²² *Od.* 5.278-281 and *Od.* 5.388-393.

of the great war-cry,²³ Proteus would simply vanish back into the sea. Instead, he must coax the seal-herder into slumber by becoming a part of Proteus' world; becoming a sea monster himself.

The ploy works perfectly, so well that Proteus doesn't even have the slightest idea that they are present:

At noon the Old Man came out of the sea and found his well-fed seals, and went about to them all, and counted their number, and we were among the first he counted; he had no idea of any treachery. Then he too lay down among us. (*Od.* 4.450-453)

Menelaus, though disgusted at the situation, seems to have succeeded remarkably well at sublimating his heroic persona and adopting that of a bestial sea creature including its rank odor. Gone is the boasting warrior that nearly killed Paris in Book III of the *Iliad*. The trials of homecoming are clearly shown here to require a different assortment of characteristics, a more patient, sneaky heroism. Menelaus, as he lies in wait for Proteus, has entered the liminal status that Mills describes. He is passing through Barth's boundary, dropping his identity and adopting a new one in order to treat with the unknown. He is ready both to face the danger and reap the rewards that such an interaction promises.

Menelaus' trick of hiding among the seals parallels several of the episodes that Odysseus endures during his wandering. Most obviously, the whole episode seems to be an inversion of Odysseus' escape from the Cyclops Polyphemus in Book IX:

And as I thought, this was the plan that seemed best to me. There were some male sheep, rams, well nourished, thick and fleecy, handsome and large, with a dark depth of wool ... Three rams carried each man, but as for myself, there was one ram, far the finest of all the flock. This one I clasped around the back, snuggled under the wool of the belly, and stayed there still, and with a firm twist of the hands and enduring spirit clung fast to the glory of this fleece, unrelenting

²³ *Od.* 15.14.

... Meanwhile, their master, suffering and in bitter pain, felt over the backs of all his sheep, standing up as they were, but in his guilelessness did not notice how my men were fastened under the breasts of his fleecy sheep. Last of all the flock the ram went out of the doorway, loaded with his own fleece, and with me, and my close counsels. (*Od.* 9.424-445)

Polyphemus, another pastorally-inclined monster closely associated with the sea, is duped just like Proteus by mortal men using his own flocks to escape his notice. Where Menelaus uses the sealskin ruse to get closer to Proteus, Odysseus uses the "fleecy" rams to escape from the Cyclops, but both actions mark a progression towards the goal of homecoming. The implications for each hero are the same. Odysseus, just like Menelaus, subdues his heroic persona and hides quietly under an animal to reach his goals. If Menelaus' seal-like odor fooled Proteus, it is the touch of Odysseus' fleecy hide that fools Polyphemus. Again, the suspension of traditional identity proves useful when dealing with the forces of chaos.

A second parallel to Menelaus' assumption of a hybrid identity again lies with Odysseus' salvation by Leukothea in Book V. Leukothea comes to Odysseus as a sea-crow just as he finds himself on the brink of destruction by Poseidon's angry sea. The goddess offers him her "immortal veil," which allows the hero to survive in the sea for two days and nights and presumably breathe underwater.²⁴ I will address this episode in much greater detail later, but for now, suffice it to say that the use of Leukothea's veil separates Odysseus not only from his role as a hero, but even his identity as a human. Odysseus, in order to conquer the chaotic sea, becomes a sea monster himself; a change echoed in Menelaus' much more compact encounter with sea-born chaos.

The final trait that allows Menelaus to succeed against Proteus is another quality typically associated with Odysseus; tenacity or an enduring spirit:

²⁴ *Od.* 5.351-405.

We with a cry sprang up and rushed upon him, locking him in our arms, but the Old Man did not forget the subtlety of his arts. First he turned into a bearded lion, and then to a serpent, then to a leopard, then to a great boar, and he turned into fluid water, to a tree with towering branches, but we held stiffly on to him with enduring spirit. But when the Old Man versed in devious ways grew weary of all this, he spoke to me in words and questioned me: "... What do you want?" (*Od.* 4.454-463)

The final element of Proteus' defeat hinges on whether or not Menelaus will hold on long enough for the god to exhaust himself. The hero and his companions are strong enough to contain him, and their disguise has allowed them to become close enough to Proteus to seize him, but the real question revolves around endurance. The mortals prove up to the task, and manage to hang on to the embodied chaos within their arms, until it becomes so weary that it is helpful.

Odysseus' endurance is also a major key to the eventual success of his journey, an element mentioned in many episodes throughout the *Odyssey*. The phrase that Menelaus uses to describe his capture of Proteus, which Lattimore translates as "with enduring spirit" is τετληότι θυμῷ, the exact same phrase that Homer uses to describe the manner in which Odysseus hangs on to his sheep during his escape from Polyphemus.²⁵ This "enduring spirit" allows both heroes to wait through uncomfortable or unpleasant situations in order to gain a position advantageous to their survival or wealth. For both Menelaus and Odysseus, endurance proves more useful than the combat prowess, horsemanship, or fleetness of foot that one might typically associate with a Homeric hero.

During his encounter with Proteus, Menelaus displays many of the same traits and the type of good fortune that allows Odysseus to survive his journey through the sea. His conversation with Telemachus provides an inroad that allows the reader to make sense of Odysseus' plight and sets the tone for Odysseus' very similar, expanded tale. Menelaus,

²⁵ *Od.* 4.459 and 9.435, respectively.

since he has lived to tell the tale, also prepares the reader for Odysseus' impending success, demonstrating that a capable hero can survive an encounter with the chaotic.

Proteus as an Embedded Simile for the Sea

If Menelaus' tale is a condensed foreshadowing of Odysseus' ten-year struggle, then Proteus must represent the sea itself within the episode. His shape-shifting power, the ability to fluidly transform into any beast, plant, or substance he desires, clearly associates him with the kind of chaos that Mills sees in Poseidon's sea. Further, his very presence evokes the stench of deep salt water; he herds seals as though they are sheep, and seems to know information from every place the sea touches. Viewed in this light, as a mythic conceptualization of the sea itself, the study of Proteus' attributes and behavior can provide useful insight into ancient Greek ideas about the mythological sea.

Proteus, understood as representative of the Homeric sea that Odysseus must traverse, shows quite clearly the mixed promise of peril and reward that the sea offers Odysseus. Moreover, the details of Proteus' description reveal specific characteristics of both the danger and reward contained within the sea.

The danger that Proteus represents has more to do with what he is than what he does. As Eidothea warns Menelaus, Proteus' form contains every other possible form: "And he will try you by taking the form of all creatures that come forth and move on the earth, he will be water and magical fire." (*Od.* 4.417-418) This unpredictability, the chaos which Mills assigns to monstrous bodies of water, encapsulates the problem with the sea in the *Odyssey* using the broadest strokes; it can bring forth anything. Proteus flits through identities like quicksilver, a clear and terrifying threat to Menelaus' solid Greekness.

In a poem that continually emphasizes the basic elements of an Achaean cultural identity (guest-friendship, marriage, kingship, and poetry, to name a few) Proteus has, by his very nature, an extremely flexible, even liquid, identity. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in "Monster Culture (7 Theses)," an article presenting theoretical approaches to monstrosity, comments that beings which defy categorization pose an inherent threat to organized culture:

This refusal to participate in the classificatory "order of things" is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions. (Cohen (1996): 6)

Proteus cannot be classified and therefore cannot be predicted. He is situated so early within the *Odyssey's* narrative structure in order to serve as an embedded preview of the sea with which Odysseus will struggle later in the poem. Proteus, then, the embodiment of total unpredictability, is the broad thesis of the sea's role throughout the rest of the poem. Other monsters that Odysseus encounters also reflect certain aspects of the sea, as will be shown below, but Proteus contains all of those individual elements within his ever-shifting form. He is the promise of chaos.

Menelaus clearly belongs to many seemingly solid categories; warrior, Greek, human. Just as Cohen predicts, however, in confronting Proteus' incoherence, his attachment to those categories is eroded. As has been noted, Menelaus cannot deal with Proteus without pretending to be a seal, an unpleasant and uncomfortable experience by which he symbolically removes himself from the world of human culture and enters Proteus' realm of chaos and difference.

Odysseus will experience the same reduction of difference between himself and the creatures of the sea that Menelaus does, but on a much broader scale. That the stark differences which separate Odysseus and the sea monsters which he encounters might be reduced to nothing is ultimately the greatest danger that the sea poses, the treacherous ground that Odysseus must negotiate.

As Cohen claims, exposure to incoherent difference is dangerous not only to the individual hero, but the very foundation of cultural identity:

By revealing that difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential, the monster threatens to destroy not just individual members of society, but the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed. (Cohen (1996): 12)

Cohen claims that monsters do not threaten only individual humans, but, because their monstrosity defies all laws of social and natural order, they threaten the underpinnings of what allow humans to predict difference, and thus are a threat to all human culture. If the existence of a monster denies categorization, the person confronting the monster must face that his or her own identity is built upon arbitrary distinctions rather than essential qualities.

This is Proteus' (and therefore the sea's) comprehensive threat. Other monsters and sea-creatures in the *Odyssey* are useful to examine since they tie the abstract fear of chaos to specific cultural phenomena. The details of every encounter differ and conceptualize different cultural experiences and concerns. Each subsequent monster that Odysseus faces, however, reflects one basic underlying fear: that in confronting the difference which exists on the sea, cultural identity will be consumed and destroyed. Proteus speaks directly to this fear.

Just as Proteus' behavior during the episode with Menelaus reveals the polymorphous dangers of the sea, it also shows the many benefits that a traveler may gain by suffering through an encounter with the sea's chaos. For Menelaus, the fruits of his travels are evident; his wife Helen sits at his side, despite marital woe so notorious that it scarcely bears mentioning. Furthermore, Menelaus receives Telemachus and his companion Peisistratos to a well-stocked, smoothly-functioning household, whence he rules his rightful kingdom unchallenged.²⁶ Successful travel has not only allowed Menelaus to reclaim his kidnapped wife, but also to resume his kingship of a Sparta free from the type of troubles that plague Odysseus' household. The sea, though unfriendly during his journey, yielded quite a bounty for Menelaus. All of these things were obtained by through a safe homecoming, which Menelaus achieved through the advice of a conquered Proteus.

The only thing that Proteus can offer Menelaus is knowledge. While Odysseus gains and loses several fortunes during his travels, only to finally arrive at Ithaka with a large treasure, legitimizing, perhaps, the length of his absence, Menelaus manages to hang on to the original clutch of booty that he won in Troy. Menelaus' great wealth, which allows him to receive Telemachus so graciously in Book IV, however, would have meant nothing if he had been unable to return to Sparta. The information that Proteus can give to Menelaus is worth more than anything else that the hero possesses.

Not only does Proteus tell Menelaus to which gods he must sacrifice before he can return home, but in an episode that alludes to Odysseus' encounters in the underworld in Book XI, he tells him what has happened to the other Greek heroes.²⁷ In a way this is

²⁶ *Od.* 4.30-75.

²⁷ *Od.* 4.492-560.

just as important about the more direct information Proteus has about ending the preternaturally becalmed weather. Proteus describes the death of two heroes; Ajax, who dies because he angered the gods, and Menelaus' brother Agamemnon, who was killed because he angered his wife.²⁸ These are the two main problems that face both Odysseus and Menelaus; the wrath of the gods, and the potential for someone close to them, particularly their wives, to take advantage of their long absence. Agamemnon is killed because he is "all unsuspecting of death" when he arrives home.²⁹ Menelaus knows that he will escape a similar fate only because of Proteus' prophetic powers.

In order to make Proteus yield up his information, Menelaus must first endure him, and then converse with him:

You must hold stiffly on to him and squeeze him the harder. But when at last he himself, speaking in words, questions you, being now in the same form he was in when you saw him sleeping, then, hero, you must give over your force and let the old man go free ... and ask him how to make your way home on the sea where the fish swarm. (*Od.* 4.419-424)

Eidothea's advice here speaks to more than simply conquering a monster. Menelaus must instead grapple with this manifestation of chaos until it returns to the form which is most like Menelaus' own. He must endure Proteus' shapeshifting until the monster addresses him in human speech. In other words, Menelaus must struggle with Proteus until they can converse with one another through a shared medium.

While Proteus serves as the most direct example in the *Odyssey* of how monsters can represent characteristics of the sea, his episode is certainly not the only instance of this phenomenon throughout the poem. All of the entities that Odysseus encounters during his wandering, of course, make their home far out in the sea and thus show the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

forms of the chaos that one might expect to find straying so far from an imagined cultural center (in this case, the Greek-speaking, "known" regions of the Mediterranean). They stand as boundary markers showing the limits of Greek knowledge, forming a border which Odysseus is constantly testing, just as Menelaus grappled with Proteus' chaotic body. All the monsters and minor deities that Odysseus encounters between Books IX and XII, taken together, provide a textured portrait of the sea's own polymorphous body. The sea's body is a chaotic body, like Proteus', conceptualized and re-imagined out of countless incidents of intercultural contact, whether traumatic, beneficial, or ambiguous.

Though the denizens of the sea in the *Odyssey* all speak to different aspects of this chaotic body, several of these monsters and island deities are linked particularly closely to the sea within the text. Proteus' body contained a lion, a serpent, and a leopard, and so too does the sea show many distinct aspects to Odysseus. A closer examination of some of these monsters will throw specific fears into relief against the monolithic apprehension of the sea's chaos.

III. The Monsters - Representations of Cultural Chaos

Homer's sea is full of monsters, gods, and nymphs, and each reveals a slightly different aspect of the sea. Due to the limited scope of my study, however, I will focus on only three of the many creatures who threaten Odysseus' homeward journey:

Charybdis, Polyphemus, and Circe. These three entities typify most manifestations of the sea's chaotic action towards Odysseus, and most of the other monsters in the *Odyssey* lie somewhere between these three in terms of cultural articulation. The formless, unknowable Charybdis lies at one end of the cultural spectrum of Homeric sea creatures; beautiful Circe, full of helpful knowledge, lies at the other; and Polyphemus inhabits some place in the middle.

Charybdis

The monster most difficult to distinguish from the sea itself is Charybdis. It is impossible to know where the sea ends and she begins. Charybdis' physical body is never described, only the effects of her attack:

There is a great fig tree that grows there, dense with foliage, and under this shining Charybdis sucks down the black water. For three times a day she flows it up, and three times she sucks it terribly down; may you not be there when she sucks down water, for not even the Earthshaker could rescue you out of that evil. But sailing your ship swiftly drive her past and avoid her, and make for Skylla's rock instead, since it is far better to mourn six friends lost out of your ship than the whole company. (*Od.* 12.103-110)

Charybdis seems to be a creature that somehow swallows great gouts of seawater, indiscriminately consuming whatever happens to be floating above and creating an enormous whirlpool in the process. Even though Odysseus himself escapes from the creature later, he is warned by Circe that sailing too close to Charybdis' domain will

result in the loss of his entire crew. Rather than face that fate, Odysseus follows Circe's advice and instead faces Skylla, the many-headed monster who snatches six of his companions and drags them to be devoured.

Charybdis is a difficult monster to analyze, because so little about her is revealed. In stark contrast to the rich and terrifying description of Skylla, we are never allowed a glimpse of Charybdis' body or given any hint as to her appearance for all that she is clearly the more destructive of the two.³⁰ This formlessness also prevents students of Homer from seeing whether or not she embodies certain human traits like the Cyclopes or the Laistrygones. Although she is hidden from the readers' eyes, however, an analysis of Charybdis can still reveal several important characteristics of the sea, *because* of her obscurity, rather than in spite of it.

Charybdis speaks to what is one of the most basic fears of the sea, or even of water in general - one never knows what lurks beneath the surface, and, should one try to cross the sea one runs the risk of being dragged down to join whatever it is that lurks below. The vagueness of the descriptions of Charybdis, particularly with regards to any physical features, highlights this fear of the unknown. Charybdis' threat is not only death, but complete obliteration. Her victims may as well never have existed; no companions will carry news of their deaths back home, no one will know whether to erect a funerary mound or towards which gods to offer sacrifices, any captured booty will sit useless in the depths. For a hero of the Trojan War, whose chief motivation and greatest reward is that their name and deeds are remembered, the sudden and inglorious death that Charybdis offers is perhaps the most odious fate of all.³¹ Charybdis physically embodies

³⁰ See *Od.* 12.85-100 for the description of Skylla's monstrous body.

³¹ For the consternation that Odysseus' unknown fate causes Telemachus, see *Od.* 1.234-243.

a fear of the sea's capacity to completely envelope a sailor and to drag him down into the depths.

The lack of detail about Charybdis also removes the possibility for negotiation with her. Odysseus' way with words and his quick wit allow him to make the most out of nearly any situation; when speaking to the Cyclops not only does he come up with a clever trick that saves him later the moment he senses danger, but he also maintains a dialogue with the monster which allows him to trick Polyphemus into becoming drunk.³² Charybdis, on the other hand, is a threat that Odysseus cannot persuade, delay, or distract. When diplomacy fails, Odysseus always shows himself ready to fight even the most daunting of horrors; he readies a spear as he sails past Skylla, contemplates killing Polyphemus while the monster sleeps, and even cows the shades of the underworld and Circe herself with his drawn sword.³³ Against Charybdis, however, there is never any hint that Odysseus might defeat her. The best he can hope for is to avoid Charybdis, and, failing that, to survive, just as if he faced a storm or the unfriendly glance of a god. Charybdis is not only unknown, but unknowable, and suggests that there are dangers in sea travel that no amount of skill, courage, or intelligence can overcome.

Despite the instantly ruinous nature of Charybdis' monstrosity, however, elements of her nature become useful to Odysseus in his attempt to traverse the stretch of water under which she dwells, though in an extremely subtle manner. If an encounter with Charybdis can be endured, though it may be dangerous and frightening, as with Proteus, it yields helpful and necessary elements for continuing towards a homecoming.

³² *Od.* 9.281-363.

³³ For Skylla, see *Od.* 12.226-231; against Polyphemus, 9.289-305; in Hades, 11.44-50; and Circe, 10.321-325.

While it was clearly the wiser plan for Odysseus to steer towards Skylla on his initial pass through the region, thus sacrificing a few of his crewmen in order to preserve the rest of them, his ship and crew have been completely destroyed by Zeus' storm on his return to the area and he approaches Skylla and Charybdis alone.³⁴ If he sails close to Skylla's rocks again, he will certainly be eaten, but as a single castaway with no ship to worry about, he now has a better chance with Charybdis. He has seen how she creates the whirlpool and is prepared:

At this time Charybdis sucked down the sea's salt water, but I reached high in the air above me, to where the tall fig tree grew, and caught hold of it and clung like a bat; there was no place where I could firmly brace my feet or climb up on it, for the roots of it were far from me, and the branches hung out far, big and long branches that overshadowed Charybdis. Inexorably I hung on, waiting for her to vomit up the keel and mast again. I longed for them, and they came late... Then I let go with hands and feet, and dropped off, and came crashing down between and missing the two long timbers, but I mounted these, and with both hands I paddled my way out. (*Od.* 12.431-444)

So, while Charybdis does drag things under the sea, she also returns them after a while. Amid the chaos of Charybdis' feeding, Odysseus clings to the one stable element, the fig tree, and waits for his makeshift craft to be returned to him. Charybdis, like Proteus for Menelaus, is an unavoidable evil for Odysseus. However, once the hero has persevered through the encounter, she will provide the means for further progress. Once again, unavoidable encounters, while harrowing, prove to be profitable.

While Charybdis displays no visible form or any sign of cultured behavior, Cohen claims that no monster is devoid of cultural context:

...the monster of prohibition polices the borders of the possible, interdicting through its grotesque body some behaviors and actions, envaluing others... The monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations that we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot – *must* not – be crossed. (Cohen (1996): 13)

³⁴ *Od.* 12.417-430.

Charybdis is such a “monster of prohibition,” marking the edges of human knowledge. Where Proteus passively threatens established identity by demonstrating the facile mutability of seemingly stable and distinct forms, Charybdis poses a much more immediately dire threat to cultural boundaries. An approach towards Proteus precipitates an erosion of categories, but Charybdis menaces the utter and unceremonious obliteration of self; she will thoroughly envelope all who come within range of her regardless of category or identity. She shows that, as Cohen says, there are areas into which a traveler must not wander, cultural conventions that must not be abandoned under any circumstances, or the offending person will suffer permanent disconnection from his ethnic identity. Once a sailor encounters Charybdis, not only will he die, but his name will be forgotten and news about him will never reach those awaiting his return. Odysseus, in typical fashion, scrapes up against this boundary as closely as possible while still retaining a chance to move past it.

Polyphemus

Not all of the monsters that Odysseus encounters speak to such a nameless, formless horror, though. In stark contrast to Charybdis' unconquerable formlessness stands the Cyclops Polyphemus. Where Charybdis is never physically described, Polyphemus' horrible appearance, size, and customs are recounted in vivid detail, showing him to be both individualistic and savage:

Inside there lodged a monster of a man, who now was herding the flocks at a distance away, alone, for he did not range with others, but stayed away by himself; his mind was lawless, and in truth he was a monstrous wonder made to behold, not like a man, an eater of bread, but more like a wooded peak of the high mountains seen standing away from others. (*Od.* 9.186-192)

Charybdis cannot be fought or contained in any way, only endured, but Polyphemus is able to be conquered by Odysseus through a combination of force and trickery. Perhaps more than any other monster that Odysseus faces, Polyphemus shows that the danger ascribed to the *Odyssey's* sea is cultural in origin, bearing cultural signs that are at first familiar to the traveler, but so distorted that they become terrifying upon closer inspection.

Though he does not dwell within the sea as Charybdis does, Polyphemus has several associations with the sea besides the fact that he dwells far out on it. Most obviously, he is the son of Poseidon and the sea nymph Thoosa, and it is his curse that causes the sea-god to so violently persecute Odysseus.³⁵ Polyphemus can thus be viewed as a monstrous extension of the sea's chaotic force, given form and placed at its uttermost limits. Also worth mentioning is that Polyphemus, unlike some of his Cyclopes brethren, makes his home in a cave near the sea, not on the mountainous inland peaks.³⁶ His habitation in a sea cave shows a closeness to the sea that is perhaps missing in the other Cyclopes; its closeness to the water is certainly why Odysseus and his men approach it first.

Another detail which associates Polyphemus with the sea is his name. Although Polyphemus' name is usually translated as "much-famed," the word πολύφημος can also mean something like "voiceful" or "many-voiced". The sea is sometimes called by the epithet πολύφλοισβος, which means "much-sounding" or, again, "voiceful," nearly the same thing as πολύφημος.³⁷ Πολύφλοισβος, when used in relation to the sea, refers to the volume of the constant noises that the sea produces, while πολύφημος refers to the

³⁵ *Od.* 9.526-535. For Thoosa, see *Od.* 1.71-72.

³⁶ For the other Cyclopes, see *Od.* 9.112-115; for Polyphemus' cave, see *Od.* 9.181-186.

³⁷ *Od.* 13.80, 220.

number of voices chattering (ironic, considering Polyphemus' isolationism). Perhaps, however, Polyphemus can be understood as the physical, vocal embodiment of πολύφλοιστος, containing all the sighing and chattering of the sea within his large and terrible being.

Odysseus' encounter with Polyphemus is among the most detailed of the wandering adventures that he recounts to the Phaiakians. It thus has inspired comments from many scholars, and Cohen, who comments specifically on Polyphemus in his "Monster Culture" essay, is no exception:

The quintessential xenophobic rendition of the foreign (the *barbaric*- that which is unintelligible within a given cultural-linguistic system), the Cyclopes are represented as savages who have not a "law to bless them" and who lack the *techné* to produce (Greek-style) civilization. Their archaism is conveyed through their lack of hierarchy and of a politics of precedent. This dissociation from community leads to a rugged individualism that in Homeric terms can only be horrifying. (Cohen (1996): 14)

For Cohen, Polyphemus stands as an almost geographic boundary at the limits of what types of behavior are possible within Greek culture, showing all who encounter him the gruesome results of ignoring social hierarchies and cultural conventions. In many respects, the Cyclopes behave much more like humans than, for example, Skylla or Charybdis. Though his home is just a simple cave near the sea, nevertheless Polyphemus sees the use of settling in one place, sheltered from the elements. This domesticity allows the Cyclops to pursue other distinctly human practices: shepherding, fence-building and cheese-making. Though the Cyclopes pursue these activities, however, they do so without participating in any kind of communal system with one another.

Odysseus includes the individualism that Cohen mentions in the grim description of the Cyclopes that he gives to his hosts, the Phaiakians:

...we sailed on further along, and reached the country of the lawless outrageous Cyclopes who, putting all their trust in the immortal gods, neither plow with their hands nor plant anything, but all grows for them without seed planting, without cultivation, wheat and barley and also the grapevines, which yield for them wine of strength, and it is Zeus' rain that waters it for them. These people have no institutions, no meetings for counsels; rather they make their habitations in caverns hollowed among the peaks of the high mountains, and each one is the law for his own wives and children, and cares nothing about others. (*Od.* 9.105-115)

While sea creatures like *Skylla* or *Charybdis* physically embody their drive to feed in terrifying ways, *Polyphemus*, whose savagery is at first masked by the relatively innocent appearance of his environs, poses a much more insidious threat. *Odysseus*, once warned about *Charybdis*, understands that she is an implacable creature who must be avoided at all costs. The Cyclopes, however, are just close enough to humans that *Odysseus* wants to go in for a closer look, to find out what sort of people they are:

The rest of you, who are my eager companions, wait here, while I, with my own ship and companions that are in it, go and find out about these people, and learn what they are, whether they are savage and violent, and without justice, or hospitable to strangers and with minds that are godly. (*Od.* 9.172-176)

If the land of the Cyclopes had not been settled, or if the Cyclopes' hideousness had been more obvious from a distance, like *Skylla's* monstrous form, *Odysseus* would no doubt never have asked these questions. The Cyclopes' sameness, not their differences, leads *Odysseus* to examine them more closely.

Besides the fact that the Cyclopes visibly employ some of the trappings of human culture, at this early stage in his journey *Odysseus* seems far more willing to indulge his curiosity and pursue opportunities for exploration or profit – years of being kept away from *Ithaka* have not yet made return his overriding concern. His desire to see exactly what kind of people the Cyclopes are speaks to his role as what Malkin calls a

“protocolonial” hero.³⁸ Though he doesn’t attempt to found any new colonies during his return from Troy, Odysseus does seem at some points to be considering the future possibility of new colonies on subsequent journeys. The most obvious example of Odysseus’ keen eye for prime settlement locations directly precedes the incident with the Cyclops in Book IX, when Odysseus and his men happen upon an uninhabited island full of wild goats:

There is a wooded island that spreads, away from the harbor, neither close in to the land of the Cyclops nor far out from it; forested; wild goats beyond number breed there, for there is no coming and going of human kind to disturb them, nor are they visited by hunters, who in the forest suffer hardships as they haunt the peaks of the mountains, neither again is it held by herded flocks, nor farmers, but all its days, never plowed up and never planted, it goes without people and supports the bleating of wild goats. (*Od.* 9.116-124)

Odysseus goes on to explain why this island, so ripe for settlement, and though it lies so close to the land of the Cyclopes, remains wild:

For the Cyclopes have no ships with cheeks of vermilion, nor have they builders of ships among them, who could have made them strong-benched vessels, and these if made could have run them sailings to all the various cities of men, in the way that people cross the sea by means of ships and visit each other, and they could have made this island a strong settlement for them. For it is not a bad place at all, it could bear all crops in season, and there are meadow lands near the shores of the grey sea, well watered and soft; there could be grapes grown there endlessly, and there is smooth land for plowing, men could reap a full harvest always in season, since there is a very rich subsoil. Also there is an easy harbor, with no need for a hawser nor anchor stones to be thrown ashore nor cables to make fast... (*Od.* 9.125-137)

This passage reveals quite a bit about Odysseus’ decision to visit the land of the Cyclopes. Odysseus’ careful and detailed descriptions of the island’s tempting suitability for habitation show that he has the experienced eye of a farmer, vintner, sailor, and manager of land; he is well-versed in the execution of Greek pastoral and maritime cultural practice. However, the clearly inhabited lands nearby might pose a problem for

³⁸ Malkin (1998): xi.

future settlers. If a band of eager settlers returned to the island only to find it turned into a “strong settlement” by its nearby neighbors, an expensive and dangerous trip will have been wasted.

The fact that the goat-filled island is deserted is a bad sign, a testament to the nearby Cyclopes’ inability to build ships, a deficiency that indicates a ruinous lack of culture. This stunted grasp of human culture will soon destroy several of Odysseus’ men, but for Odysseus it presents a mystery that he needs unraveling before he can move on. He must find out how such a prime location remains unsettled, or the uncertainty of whether or not it will remain unsettled until other Greeks can return to it will render its discovery worthless. Contact with the unknown inhabitants of the nearby land is the only course of action that will ensure the potential usefulness of such a wonderful place. As he relates this story to the Phaiakians much later, Odysseus reveals first-hand knowledge about the Cyclopes’ lack of ship-building and seafaring ability which must be part of the hard-won intelligence that he collected during his ill-fated expedition to Polyphemus’ cave.

Odysseus’ interaction with Polyphemus is revealing as well. From the beginning, the conversation that Odysseus and Polyphemus have speaks to the uncertainty and confusion inherent in any meeting between two completely unknown parties with vastly different backgrounds. Beyond mere confusion, however, Odysseus and the audience are shown the direst set of consequences imaginable that one might suffer for failing to understand the implications of cultural misunderstanding. Moreover, this brutal encounter with Polyphemus, so early in his wanderings, precipitates a distinct change in

the way that Odysseus deals with the many unknown entities he meets on the sea, a method of coping with chaotic uncertainty that he applies even on his return to Ithaka.

Odysseus and his small expedition, equipped with gifts for the inhabitants of the nearby land, make their way to Polyphemus' cave, and wait there for their host after eating his cheese and making a sacrifice.³⁹ Odysseus doesn't seem to worry that the excellent wine he intends to give his host as a gift will be met with anything other than some form of *xenia*, that is, guest-friendship; the commonly held idea of the Greeks that all guests should be respected and cared for by their hosts. In fact, Odysseus admits that he was looking forward to teaching his uncultured host the finer points of manners:

...my proud heart had an idea that presently I would encounter a man who was endowed with great strength, and wild, with no true knowledge of laws and any customs. (*Od.* 9.213-215)

Odysseus' men, however, do not share his optimism, and, seeing booty ripe for the picking, urge him to turn the mission into a raid:

From the start my companions spoke to me and begged me to take some of the cheeses, come back again, and the next time to drive the lambs and kids from their pens, and get back quickly to the ship again, and go sailing off across the salt water but I would not listen to them, it would have been better their way, not until I could see him, see if he would give me presents. (*Od.* 9.226-229)

Again, Odysseus' desire to be acknowledged by this unknown wild man prevents him from leaving when he should have.

When Polyphemus arrives, after sealing the entrance to the cave, thus cutting Odysseus off from any outside resources, he addresses this question to the Greeks he discovers in his cave:

Strangers, who are you? From where do you come sailing over the watery ways? Is it on some business, or are you recklessly roving as pirates do, when they sail

³⁹ *Od.* 9.211-233.

on the salt sea and venture their lives as they wander, bringing evil to alien people? (*Od.* 9.252-255)

Despite the fact that Polyphemus represents the most horrible possible version of a foreign stranger, his initial queries about Odysseus' purposes explicitly reveals what must have been the most basic concerns of a denizen of the archaic Mediterranean upon meeting a stranger. Polyphemus' question directly echoes Odysseus' own desire to know about the Cyclopes "whether they are savage and violent, and without justice, or hospitable to strangers and with minds that are godly" (*Od.* 9.175-176). Both traveler and monster, when presented with strangers of unknown origins naturally exhibit keen apprehension as to the stranger's motives and intentions. Polyphemus, discovering armed men in his cave and unfettered by any sense of social tact, bluntly asks Odysseus the very question that Odysseus hopes to answer about his host.

The question of the intention of strangers, particularly armed strangers, which most travelers would have been to one another, was of supreme importance on the ancient Mediterranean.⁴⁰ In a region like the ancient sea and its coasts, absent of the centralized military power, dedicated, mechanized coast guards, and instantaneous communication that we enjoy today, a chance encounter with an unknown group of armed men would have been fraught with dire implications. De Souza, in his *Piracy in the Greco-Roman World*, claims that the entirety of Polyphemus' initial question to Odysseus is a formulaic demand that basically asks whether a person is friend or foe, reading Nestor's use of the same phrase to Telemachus as a toothless traditional greeting, lacking in any implication of realism (*Od.* 3.71-74).⁴¹ However, the phrase's formulaic nature aside, when it is used in Polyphemus' cave, the demand, if indeed it was devoid of

⁴⁰ Herodotus mentions an ancient system of trade based entirely on this uncertainty (Hdt. 4.196).

⁴¹ de Souza (1999): 18.

realism, takes on a grim and literal appropriateness. The question specifically speaks to a deep, justifiable concern for both Odysseus' band and Polyphemus.

The poem brilliantly presents a situation in which both parties are guilty of the very worst that the other suspects of them. Polyphemus is, in fact, "savage and violent, and without justice," and does not come from a people whose "minds are godly". Of course, the audience expects some level of savagery from Polyphemus, prepared for their lawlessness by Odysseus' introduction of the Cyclopes earlier in Book IX.⁴²

More surprising, and perhaps more poignant, however, is the fact that Odysseus and his men quite clearly are exactly the sort of men that the Cyclops fears; people who sail the sea bringing evil to others. Even leaving aside Odysseus' central role in the war against and subsequent sacking of Troy, by his own admission he and his men were travelling with keen eye towards plunder. Shortly before his fateful encounter with Polyphemus, he tells the Phaiakians, he and his soldiers mounted a completely unprovoked raid on a city of a people called the Kikonians. Odysseus is matter of fact and unapologetic about the attack:

I sacked their city and killed their people, and out of their city taking their wives and many possessions we shared them out, so none might go cheated of his proper portion. (*Od.* 9.40-43)

Through this brief passage, the author of the *Odyssey* makes any arguments about the justness of Odysseus' role in the Trojan War inconsequential. Whether the Trojan War was justifiable violence or not, Odysseus' raid on the Kikonians makes it clear in exactly what kind of business he and his troops deal. Odysseus is a gentleman of fortune; he and his retinue, as they travel homeward, seek out their main chance for profit, which presents itself most often in the form of pilfered booty.

⁴² *Od.* 9.105-130.

If the raid on the Kikonians is not enough to justify the Cyclops' suspicions, consider that Odysseus has just finished talking his men out of completely sacking the Cyclops' cave immediately before Polyphemus discovers the Greeks. Odysseus, as has been noted, does not discourage the robbery out of any ethical qualms about theft, but because of a prideful desire to demonstrate his cultural superiority over a bumpkin. There can be no doubt that Odysseus and his men are, in fact, "recklessly roving as pirates do, when they sail on the salt sea and venture their lives as they wander, bringing evil to alien people."⁴³ In fact, the one maritime role that Odysseus doesn't seem to play is that of an honest trader.

Understood in this light, the interaction between Odysseus and Polyphemus reveals a slightly more subtle context than one might imagine could be read in the confrontation of a chaos monster by an unambiguous culture hero. Odysseus' interaction with the Kikonians is just as ruinous for them as Polyphemus' hunger is for Odysseus' men. However, Odysseus' banditry is certainly not characterized as "wrong" in the poem: in fact, he himself admits that his fault in Polyphemus' cave is prohibiting his men from robbing the place and then escaping.⁴⁴ Instead, Odysseus attempts to force the practice of his own cultural morays, in this case *xenia*, in a foreign setting; bringing elements of his Greek ethnic identity across the boundaries of its relevance with disastrous consequences. Cunning, guarded banditry would have allowed Odysseus to escape an encounter with Polyphemus, but by seeking open interaction with the representative of a clearly alien culture, Odysseus opens himself up to what Cohen calls

⁴³ De Souza says that *leisthes*, the word that Lattimore translates here as "pirates," should more properly be understood to mean "bandits" or "raiders," since the modern understanding of piracy is that it occurs at sea rather than from the sea and *leisthes* clearly makes no such distinction. For more on the etymology of the Greek words associated with maritime banditry, see de Souza (1999): 18.

⁴⁴ *Od.* 9.228-229.

“incorporation into the wrong cultural body” (Cohen (1996): 14), which manifests itself in the gruesome death of several of his men.

Despite his early blitheness, Odysseus learns the lesson of the Cyclops’ godless savagery quite well and turns the table on Polyphemus by temporarily abandoning his own need for cultural recognition and successfully incorporating himself into the Cyclops’ own cultural system; by disguising himself as a sheep, he seamlessly blends in with his Cyclopean surroundings. It is this sublime adaptability that makes Odysseus uniquely suited to test out the uttermost boundaries of the Homeric sea.

Odysseus’ initial response to Polyphemus’ question is a completely honest account of who he and his men are and from where they’re travelling, as well as a genuine offer of peace and friendship:

We are Achaians coming from Troy, beaten off our true course by winds from every direction across the great gulf of the open sea, making for home, by the wrong way, on the wrong courses. So we have come. So it has pleased Zeus to arrange it. We claim we are of the following of the son of Atreus, Agamemnon, whose fame now is the greatest thing under heaven, such a city was that he sacked and destroyed so many people; but now in turn we come to you and are suppliants at your knees, if you might give us a guest present or otherwise some gift of grace, for such is the right of strangers. Therefore respect the gods, O best of men. We are your suppliants and Zeus the guest god, who stands behind all strangers with honors due the, avenges any wrong toward strangers and suppliants. (*Od.* 9.259-266)

This attempt at bald sincerity, of course, fails miserably. Polyphemus, though, is equally truthful in his disdainful reply:

Stranger, you are a simple fool, or come from far off, when you tell me to avoid the wrath of the gods or fear them. The Cyclopes do not concern themselves over Zeus of the aegis, nor any of the rest of the blessed gods, since we are far better than they, and for fear of the hate of Zeus I would not spare you or your companions either, if the fancy took me otherwise. But tell me, so I may know: where did you put your well-made ship when you came? Nearby or far off? (*Od.* 9.273-280)

Contained within Polyphemus' response are sufficient elements to warn Odysseus of the danger he finds himself in: a completely inverted respect for the gods; the revelation that no invocation that Odysseus might make can save he and his men; and a shrewd tactical question about his ship, which is both Odysseus' only means of escape and beyond the culture of the Cyclopes, the acquisition of which would allow them to "make sailings to all the various cities of men".

Polyphemus calls Odysseus νήπιος, a word which Lattimore translates as "simple fool," but which might also be translated as "childish" or "naïve"; a person who is foolish in their lack of experience.⁴⁵ Indeed, Polyphemus' characterization of Odysseus is not off the mark, since Odysseus does not yet have any experience within a Cyclopean context. However, Odysseus has the ability to adapt very quickly to this dangerous environment, and his status as νήπιος within the culture of the Cyclopes is only momentary. Once he realizes the threat, he accesses elements of human culture unknown to Polyphemus, showing that the Cyclops, not Odysseus, is truly νήπιος.

Odysseus, with quicksilver wits, perceives the danger and fundamentally modifies his approach towards Polyphemus and, beyond the cave of the Cyclops, towards the chaotic sea through which he must pass:

So he spoke, trying me out, but I knew too much and was not deceived, but answered him in turn, and my words were crafty: "Poseidon, Shaker of the Earth, has shattered my vessel. He drove it against the rocks on the outer coast of your country, cracked on a cliff, it is gone, the wind on the sea took it; but I with these you see, got away from sudden destruction." (*Od.* 9.281-286)

In stark contrast to the broad and unassuming statement with which Odysseus began, this compact, carefully guarded answer assumes neither good will nor any cultural respect

⁴⁵ For a detailed explanation of the νήπιος character, see Edmunds (1990).

from Polyphemus and is artfully framed to protect what fragile resources Odysseus possesses. The discovery of Odysseus' ship by Polyphemus would destroy any chance of escape, and a lie about more men waiting for Odysseus to return could easily be investigated and shown false. The false story about a shipwreck, though ironically foreshadowing Odysseus' future trials, is both plausible, and, thanks to the detail about the wind sweeping away the debris, impossible to verify. Odysseus has thus protected the means of his escape and lulled the Cyclops into believing that no such avenue is available to the Greek. Odysseus' new approach to Polyphemus appeals to the lowest common denominators in the situation, carefully carving out room to maneuver within the realm of Polyphemus' cultural control.

Odysseus has no immediate recourse, however, and can only watch in horror as his men begin to be slaughtered.⁴⁶ He contemplates killing the monster in his sleep, but he has been enveloped in the Cyclops' cave, the sphere of his cultural control, and Odysseus realizes that the Cyclops must be alive to release them from it. What follows is a horrible parody of *xenia*, where Odysseus uses his potent Maronian wine, the pinnacle of the type of organized, communal production that the Cyclops lack, to make Polyphemus, unused to such strong drink, fall into a deep sleep. Before he sleeps, however, Polyphemus, in a mockery of true guest-friendship, offers Odysseus the gift of being eaten last, but not before Odysseus uses another pragmatic lie, the clever pseudonym "Nobody."⁴⁷

What follows, the blinding of Polyphemus and the Greek escape by clinging to the bellies of his sheep, shows how Odysseus insinuates himself into Polyphemus'

⁴⁶*Od.* 9.287-295.

⁴⁷*Od.* 9.298-374.

domain, creating a condition wherein he is indistinguishable from other elements of the Cyclops' natural habitat. The blinding of the monster is also both a triumph of the communal effort which the Cyclopes eschew over Polyphemus' prodigiously strong but ultimately limited individualism and another example of Odysseus' occasional dependence on divine forces:

... when the beam of olive, green as it was, was nearly at the pint of catching fire and glowed, terribly incandescent, then I brought it close up from the fire and my friends about me stood fast. Some great divinity breathed courage into us. They seized the beam olive, sharp at the end, and leaned on it into the eye, while I from above leaning my weight on it twirled it, like a man with a brace-and-bit who bores into a ship timber, and his men from underneath, grasping the strap on either side whirl it, and it bites resolutely deeper. So seizing the fire-point-hardened timber we twirled it in his eye, and the blood boiled around the hot point, so that the blast and scorch of the burning ball singed all his eyebrows and eyelids, and the fire made the roots of his eye crackle. (*Od.* 9.378-390)

The use of a ship-building simile drives home the triumph that is being won here; the organized, commonly held culture of the Greeks that allows them to build ships (and forge metal, as the simile in the following lines highlights) also allows them to work together to overcome the wild and powerful anti-culture of the lone Cyclops.

By blinding Polyphemus, Odysseus removes his ability to distinguish between the familiar and the foreign, a weakness that allows him to take on the guise of the Cyclops' own sheep, which are so familiar to the Cyclops that they provide a perfect vehicle for escape. Now Odysseus has made Polyphemus νήπιος, which Lattimore translates as here as an attribute rather than an epithet: "guilelessness".⁴⁸ Susan Edmunds, in her book

Homeric Nepios, provides a detailed assessment of the νήπιος character:

The typically *nepios* figure lives in a fragmented and dangerous world, in danger of becoming an orphan and consequently a social outcast, or failing to observe the laws of hospitality; he or she is outside the web of human interconnections.

⁴⁸ *Od.* 9.442.

Furthermore, the *nepios* person is unable to put together inferences from the past or signs that reveal the future and is thus trapped in the ephemera. (Edmunds (1990): 98)

This description clearly sums up Polyphemus' state after being blinded, but it really was his state before Odysseus blinded him as well. He fails to observe the laws of hospitality, is far outside of human interconnections, and, throughout his interaction with Odysseus, fails to perceive that he is dealing with the very man that a prophet warned would blind him.⁴⁹ Odysseus, then, has not made Polyphemus νήπιος, his very nature has rendered him thus. What Odysseus does when he blinds Polyphemus is manifest the Cyclops' νήπιος nature upon him physically, using all the attributes that mark him (Odysseus) as not νήπιος: he brought along his wine in order to observe the laws of hospitality, his place within human interconnection allows him to work together with his men, and his quick wits allow him to protect himself from Polyphemus' wounded rage with his well-thought-out lies.

Odysseus learns from his encounter from Polyphemus that he must find ways to operate within foreign systems, to form himself in whatever ways he is able to constantly shifting, alien cultural landscapes if he is to survive his trek across Poseidon's chaotic sea. Unlike Proteus, Odysseus cannot literally change his shape. The aspect of his person that he can control, however, is his identity. By manipulating elements of his identity (in this case, his name and the fact that he possesses a ship laying intact not far from the cave) and sublimating others (his desire to slay the Cyclops, for example (*Od.* 9.298-301)) he is able to succeed against the cultural obliteration that Polyphemus threatens. Rather than use his strategic ability to misrepresent himself sparingly,

⁴⁹ *Od.* 9.507-517.

Odysseus makes shifting his persona a *modus operandi*; it becomes his default reaction in any uncertain situation.

The encounter with Polyphemus is the first time during his homeward journey that Odysseus converses with the chaotic, hybrid danger that the sea contains. He begins by blithely revealing the truth about himself and his origins, but once shown that any regard the chaotic denizens of the sea might have for his carefully cultivated cultural identity is dwarfed by their ravenous drive to consume, he abandons the truth about his travels and adopts whatever tale will buy him time, get him information, or win him sympathy. Even when he returns to Ithaka, Odysseus rarely is initially forthright with anyone he meets, even allies and family members.⁵⁰ From his encounter with Polyphemus, Odysseus learns the necessity of fluid cultural identity while engaging with the chaos of the sea. As the sea presents polymorphous dangers, Odysseus adapts to them, allowing him to draw ever closer to his ultimate goal, homecoming.

Circe: The Threat of Marriage

Odysseus is not always at such direct odds with the many entities that represent the sea's constantly shifting chaos, however, and threats to his successful homecoming do not always come in the form of a flesh-devouring monster. Random chaos can produce relatively innocuous things just as easily as it does dangers. In addition to a lion and a snake, Proteus transforms himself into water and a tree, things frightening only because of their uncanny context.⁵¹ Regardless of whether a sea creature is a terrible monster or

⁵⁰ The intricate details of the "Cretan tales" that Odysseus employs once he returns to Ithaka are beyond the scope of this paper, but how his experiences on the chaotic borderland of the sea influence his behavior in Ithaka and what the details of the "Cretan tales" reveal about the *Odyssey's* conceptualized subtext are questions that I hope to address in future work.

⁵¹ *Od.* 4.457-458.

an alluring goddess, however, the basic threat remains the same: permanent incorporation into a foreign cultural body. Whether this incorporation occurs through physical consumption or a more benign social attachment, such as marriage, makes no difference to the danger it poses to Odysseus' success.

Odysseus spends much of his sea journey being entertained by Circe and then Calypso, female deities who represent a more welcoming side of the sea's turmoil. However, the prospect that he will choose to stay as a husband or paramour with one of the welcoming female goddesses that he encounters in his travels, or even the Phaiakian Nausikaa, is just as disastrous to his return to Ithaka as his consumption by Charybdis or Polyphemus would be. Both goddesses desire the same thing from Odysseus, that he be permanently incorporated into their divine culture through marriage:

For in truth Kalypso, shining among deities, kept me with her in her shining caverns, desiring me for her husband, and so likewise Aiaian Circe the guileful detained me beside her in her halls, desiring me for a husband, but never could she persuade the heart within me. So it is that nothing is more sweet in the end than country and parents ever, even when far away one lives in a fertile place, when it is in alien country, far from his parents. (*Od.* 9.29-36)

Odysseus makes clear his reasons for avoiding such a union. Regardless of how wonderful a foreign place is, nothing is more desirable than one's home country and family.

In light of Malkin's approach, as I have argued previously, these episodes can be understood as stories that conceptualize an aggregation of similar, actual events that were experienced by members of archaic Greek society. Odysseus' encounters with both goddesses speak to cultural opportunities that would have presented themselves in the course of maritime travel to a traveler like Odysseus, particularly the opportunity to completely abandon one's own ethnic identity and become grafted into an alien cultural

system through marriage. While such a marriage might not be immediately or directly negative for the individual, the society that he has left behind will suffer for his abandonment, and, if we trust the point of view of the *Odyssey*, he will find no lasting satisfaction from such a permanent divorce with his original culture.

In many ways, Odysseus' encounters with Circe and Calypso frame the story of his wandering; the narrative first finds Odysseus weeping on Calypso's island in Book V, and he ends the story of his travels to the Phaiakians by telling them how he arrived on Calypso's island at the end of Book XII. Circe's island, on the other hand, occupies a central position in his wandering (Books X and XII) and, just as it is couched in between descriptions of Odysseus' time with Calypso, it surrounds Odysseus' side-quest into the underworld in Book XI. Nanno Marinatos, in her article "The Cosmic Journey of Odysseus," suggests that Aiaia, the island of Circe, and Ogygia, the island home of Calypso, respectively mark the uttermost east and west points of Odysseus' journey, the cosmological nexuses where the path of the sun meets the sea.⁵² This theory helps, perhaps, to explain the literary arrangement; if Marinatos is correct, then, in a sense, Odysseus' travels are all bracketed geographically by these two islands.

For the purposes of this study, both Calypso and Circe fill very similar roles; both are helpful and powerful female representatives of the sea who nevertheless present grave danger to Odysseus' return. I will focus on Odysseus' encounter with Circe since she, unlike Calypso, employs a type of magic which changes the shape of her victims, a supernatural representation of what her intended marriage to Odysseus will do to the hero if it occurs.

⁵² Marinatos (2001): 396-397.

Circe's parentage marks her as a physical representation of the mingling of the sun and the sea, a fact which supports Marinatos' reading of the location of her island:

We came to Aiaia, which is an island. There lived Circe of the lovely hair, the dread goddess who talks with mortals, who is own sister to the malignant minded Aietes; for they both are children of Helios, who shines on mortals, and their mother is Perse, who in turn is daughter of Ocean. (*Od.* 10.135-139)

The danger that Circe poses to a person's identity is clearly shown in her habit of transforming men into animals, first employed against a group of Odysseus' men who are investigating her home:

She brought them inside and seated them on chairs and benches, and mixed them a potion, with barley and cheese and pale honey added to Pramneian wine, but put into the mixture malignant drugs, to make them forgetful of their own country. When she had given them this and they had drunk it down, next thing she struck them with her wand and drove them into her pig pens, and they took the look of pigs, with the heads and voices and bristles of pigs, but the minds within them stayed as they had been before. So crying they went in, and before them Circe threw down acorns for them to eat, and ilex and cornel buds, such food as pigs who sleep on the ground always feed on. (*Od.* 10.233-243)

Unlike Polyphemus, who engages in a mockery of *xenia* only after he has revealed his monstrous intentions, Circe is the initiator of *xenia* here, and uses it to lull the suspicious Greeks into a situation which allowed her to use her powers. Circe has the same lack of respect for *xenia* that Polyphemus does, but she exploits the guest-host relationship rather than simply ignoring it, showing her familiarity with the cultural conventions of the Greeks.

As I have mentioned, Menelaus and Odysseus both symbolically take on the forms of animals during the course of their confrontation with chaotic forces. They each purposefully conceal their identity, becoming creatures that can move freely through a treacherous environment. Here, however, the fate of Odysseus' men at the table of Circe shows that such a marring of identity, even if it allows a person to infiltrate the sea's

chaos, has potentially disastrous implications. Where Odysseus and Menelaus briefly pretend to be livestock, Odysseus' men are literally transformed into pigs, a condition that presumably would have been permanent without Odysseus' intervention. The prerequisite for this condition is forgetfulness of home, a disconnection from their goals that also implies disconnection from memories of their families, communities, and upbringing –a forgetting of their cultural identity which somehow opens the way for their physical identities to be similarly altered by Circe's magic.

Odysseus, again with the help of the gods, is able to avoid Circe's trap and turn the tables on her.⁵³ Hermes gives Odysseus a magic counter-drug which allows him to resist forgetfulness and the ensuing separation from his cultural identity, and so Odysseus avoids being transformed. Though he threatens Circe with his sword, Hermes advises him to acquiesce to the goddess' desire to sleep with him. Her demand makes the reason for this clear:

Come then, put away your sword in its sheath, and let us two go up into my bed so that, lying together in the bed of love, we may then have faith and trust in each other. (*Od.* 10.333-335)

The idea that faith and trust can be cultivated between representatives of different cultures through some form of sexual contact, particularly marriage, which is Circe's ultimate goal, is hardly specific to the ancient Mediterranean, and such arrangements must have expedited trade agreements and treaties throughout the ancient world. Marriages of this nature, however, may also have allowed for a more permanent separation from one's native society, which is the danger that Odysseus faces in Circe, even after he has avoided the more obvious trap of transformation.

⁵³ *Od.* 10.275-325.

Circe doesn't necessarily try to force Odysseus to stay, but life on her island seems to breed a certain forgetfulness and suggestibility:

“But come now, eat your food and drink your wine, until you gather back again into your chests that kind of spirit you had in you when first you left the land of your fathers on rugged Ithaka. Now you are all dried out, dispirited from the constant thought of your hard wandering, nor is there any spirit in your festivity, because of so much suffering.” So she spoke, and the proud heart in us was persuaded. There for all our days until a year was completed we sat there feasting on unlimited meat and sweet wine. But when it was the end of a year and the months wasted away, and the seasons changed, and the long days were accomplished, then my eager companions called me aside and said to me: “What ails you now? It is time to think about our own country, if truly it is ordained that you shall survive and come back to your strong-founded house and the land of your fathers.” So they spoke, and the proud heart in me was persuaded. (*Od.* 10.460-468)

Circe, like Proteus for Menelaus, proves to be a quite positive force on Odysseus' homeward trajectory, though interaction with her breeds a dangerous forgetfulness, a shift of focus away from the crucial goal of homecoming. She provides an environment that rejuvenates Odysseus and his men, talks him through his journey into the underworld, and advises him about how to negotiate the remainder of his journey across the sea.⁵⁴ Odysseus encounters in Circe's island a pleasant break from the stressful and dangerous job of sailing, but one that seems to rather ominously draw his mind off his need to get back to his household. True, Circe suggests that he and his men “gather back again ... that kind of spirit” that they had in Ithaka, but is that because she hopes to rejuvenate them for the rest of their return journey, or because she hopes that they will begin to feel at home on Aiaia? Odysseus' men must remind him to continue from the island, as though he has forgotten his most basic mission.

⁵⁴ For her guidance to Hades, see *Od.* 10.488-540; for her advice on the remainder of his journey, see *Od.* 12.21-141.

In the end, however, Odysseus does move on, and Circe's aid is vital to his ultimate success. Circe does offer refreshment, but her ministrations do not just leave Odysseus and his men as healthy as they were before they began their journey, but actually in better shape than they ever were. By the same power that she can transform men into animals, she can restore humanity to them. When she does, however, the men touched by her power are in better shape than they were to begin with:

They looked like nine-year-old porkers. They stood ranged and facing her, and she, making her way through their ranks, anointed each of them with some other medicine, and the bristles, grown upon them by the evil medicine Circe had bestowed upon them before, now fell away from them, and they turned back once more into men, younger than they had been and taller for the eye to behold and handsomer by far. (*Od.* 10.390-396)

Not only does Circe restore improved human forms to them, she also reintegrates them into human society by washing them, anointing them, dressing them, and giving them human food (they were given pig fodder when they were transformed (*Od.* 10.241-243)):

Meanwhile, inside the house, Circe with loving care bathed the rest of my companions, and anointed them well with olive oil, and put about them mantles of fleece and tunics. We found them all together, feasting well in the halls. (*Od.* 10.449-452)

Here is the positive side to Circe's familiarity with human customs that allowed her to capture Odysseus' men in the first place. Her fluency in the Greek cultural idiom of *xenia* allows her both to ensnare and improve.

Circe, though the Greeks' time on her island is marked by a troubling and potentially dangerous forgetfulness, leaves her guests rejuvenated, physically as well as spiritually, and sends them on their way better equipped than when she first encountered them. Odysseus, through aid from Hermes and by cultivating understanding with Circe through physical union, is able to benefit from briefly integrating himself into the foreign

environment that Circe's realm represents and avoids the pitfall of being permanently grafted into Circe's cultural domain through transformation.

IV. Conclusion: Odysseus the Monster

Leukothea's Veil and the Limits of Identity

The chaos and danger of the sea are represented in the *Odyssey* by the variety and hybridity of the monsters and sea denizens that Odysseus encounters during his travels. These monsters threaten to engulf Odysseus at every turn, an incorporation into chaos that will destroy Odysseus' cultural identity, preventing him from returning home, preventing the society which produced him from benefitting by his struggle with alien peoples and chaotic forces.

Upon such a fluid and unpredictable landscape, Odysseus' best hope for survival is to match the chaos around him by adjusting his own identity to meet each challenge. Just as Menelaus briefly impersonates a seal to trap Proteus, Odysseus must be ready to abandon his Greek identity and adapt himself to his environment, just as he does in Polyphemus' cave, using the sheep the way Menelaus uses a seal skin. Odysseus faces the sea on its own terms, creating a third cultural category between Greek and monster or goddess, a Greek in disguise, a hero that no one notices is out of place. Through this continuous and flexible sublimation of his heroic identity, he can negotiate the chaos of the sea.

Odysseus' flexible identity during his sea journey lends itself well to Barth's idea that ethnic identity can be abandoned and reclaimed in the course of movement through the borderlands which separate distinct cultures.⁵⁵ Perhaps the example of Odysseus served as a guide for actual mariners, who found that to succeed in multicultural exchanges they needed to subdue or abandon aspects of their cultural identity, at least

⁵⁵ Barth (1998): 25.

temporarily. The *Odyssey*, then, seems to argue that such cultural flexibility is not only a helpful tool for dealing with chaos, but a necessary one. By showing how Odysseus dealt with the ambiguity and trauma of constantly shifting his identity to fit his circumstances, the *Odyssey*, as Malkin suggests myth can, actively influences the culture that produced it.⁵⁶

The passage of the *Odyssey* that best shows the necessity for an ancient mariner to marginalize his identity occasionally and the danger therein is Odysseus' salvation by Leukothea in Book V. Odysseus set out from Calypso's island well equipped with good directions and planning. Unfortunately, Poseidon, enraged over the blinding of his son Polyphemus, sends a terrible storm to destroy Odysseus' well-crafted raft and send the hero to the depths of the sea. The earth-shaker seems on the verge of succeeding, when Leukothea takes pity on Odysseus, and approaches him with the following message:

Poor man, why is Poseidon the shaker of the earth so bitterly cankered against you, to give you such a harvest of evils? And yet he will not do away with you, for all his anger. But do as I say, since you seem to me not lacking in good sense. Take off these clothes, and leave the raft to drift at the wind's will, and then strike out and swim with your hands and make for a landfall on the Phaiakian country, where your escape is destined. And here, take this veil, it is immortal, and fasten it under your chest; and there is no need for you to die, nor to suffer. But when with both your hands you have taken hold of the mainland, untie the veil and throw it out in the wine-blue water far from the land; and turn your face away as you do so. (*Od.* 5.339-350)

Odysseus, after weighing his options, stays on the raft until an enormous wave obliterates it; then, clinging to a single beam, he follows the goddess' advice. Quickly shedding the fine robes that Calypso provided for him and donning Leukothea's magical veil, he dives into the sea and begins to swim. Poseidon, apparently satisfied that Odysseus is suffering

⁵⁶ Malkin (1998): 5.

sufficiently, leaves off his attack and returns to his palace, leaving Odysseus to swim for two days until he reaches Scheria, the island home of the Phaiakians.

The narrative does not make the exact nature of Leukothea's magical cloak explicit, and so we must analyze the text in order to understand its properties. Most obviously, it somehow allows Odysseus to swim for two days and nights without stopping, at first in an extremely stormy sea. This suggests that it confers upon the bearer at least super-human endurance, and possibly supernatural buoyancy or the ability to breathe underwater. Leukothea refers to her veil as "immortal" and then tells Odysseus that there is no need for him to either die or suffer. Perhaps this simply means that the veil actually makes the bearer an immortal and immune to the discomforts of wetness and cold, so that Odysseus is able to speed towards his destination with the same comfort and ease that a sea god might. Whatever the exact properties of the veil, however, it is clearly vital to his survival since he is not to remove it until he has "taken hold of the mainland with both his hands." Most importantly for the purpose of this argument, however, Odysseus' use of the veil marks that he has abandoned the boat craft that allows mortal men to travel the sea in favor of a supernatural device; he has, at least temporarily, become a kind of sea creature.

In order for the veil to work, Odysseus must remove the fine clothing that Calypso provided for him and abandon the raft, the painstaking work of his hands and a symbol of his carefully laid plan to return home. The clothing marks him as a civilized man, and the raft shows that he is well-educated and talented in the productions of his culture. The only way for Odysseus to reach Scheria, however, requires him to shuck the trappings of his status as a well-born Greek, and put on another identity over his

nakedness, one that allows him not only to live, but to turn the sea, his greatest barrier to a homecoming, into an environment preferable to his carefully crafted raft. Odysseus is clearly reluctant to do this, choosing to stay on his doomed vessel until he has no other choice but to do as the goddess advised.

Further, just as Odysseus must abandon his civilized identity to use the veil, once it has done its job and he is safely ashore, he must, in turn, abandon it immediately. It has fulfilled its purpose, turning him briefly into a sea creature so that he can pass through the sea, but after he reaches land and faces the prospect of entering civilization once again, he cannot maintain his seafaring identity, and sets it aside. Though he tells his Phaiakian hosts about all about all his adventures and mishaps on the sea, he never mentions Leukothea's veil or his final escape from Poseidon's storm. The message is clear. While it was necessary for him to strip away the trappings of his culture and don the veil in order to survive, it is equally important for him to leave such a transgression against his identity in the sea and speak no more of it in order to be restored to human society.⁵⁷

Nausikaa and Cultural Reconciliation

In fact, Odysseus, though on dry land once again, must go through a process in order to be restored to his place as an accepted participant in civilized society. Odysseus' state upon arrival to Scheria is scarcely different than that of a wild animal. He is naked and penniless. He seems, briefly, to be some kind of monster, at least as far as his potential hosts are concerned. He emerges from the sea swollen with water and encrusted with salt, and barely has the strength to gather some leaves as a bed before he falls deeply

⁵⁷ For more on the significance of the veil as a re-occurring motif in Homer, see Nagler (1974).

asleep in a dense thicket.⁵⁸ Upon awakening, he hears Nausikaa and her hand-maidens playing nearby. Odysseus, conditioned by the breadth of his interactions with sea dwellers, wonders (just as he does about the Cyclopes, and not so differently than the way Polyphemos' asks him in Book IX) whether the people who live on the island are "violent and savage, and without justice, or hospitable to strangers, with a godly mind?"⁵⁹ He determines to investigate for himself:

So speaking, great Odysseus came from under his thicket, and from the dense foliage with his heavy hand he broke off a leafy branch to cover his body and hide the male parts, and went in the confidence of his strength, like some hill-kept lion, who advances, though he is rained on and blown by the wind, and both eyes kindle; he goes out after cattle or sheep, or it may be deer in the wilderness, and his belly is urgent upon him to get inside of a close steading and go for the sheepflocks. So Odysseus was ready to face young girls with well-ordered hair, naked though he was, for the need was on him; and yet he appeared terrifying to them, all crusted with dry spray, and they scattered one way and another down the jutting beaches. (*Od.* 6.127-138)

Odysseus seems to be at some crucial deciding point as he approaches Nausikaa and crashes out of the woods. The following ambiguous, highly charged, yet very civil encounter between Odysseus and Nausikaa has been the subject of much interest and debate among scholars, and a full discussion of it is beyond the purview of my study. One thing, however, seems quite clear from the above simile; there is a predatory aspect to Odysseus' approach towards the girls.

The comparison of Odysseus to a "hill-kept lion," λέων ὄρεσίτροφος,⁶⁰ suggests not only a predatory, animalistic aspect, but hints at a monstrous undercurrent as well. The lion to which Odysseus is compared is a wild thing, eyes ablaze with hunger, lurking just outside the sight of a carefully ordered human dwelling, ready to tear into it and

⁵⁸*Od.* 5.451-494.

⁵⁹*Od.* 6.119-121.

⁶⁰*Od.* 6.130.

wreak havoc within until his need is satisfied. The exact nature of Odysseus' need, whether physical, sexual, social, or some combination of those is irrelevant. That he stands outside the ordered workings of society, an object of fear, confident in his strength to take whatever he needs is the important point of the comparison.

The use of the phrase λέων ὀρεσίτροφος is even more startling, however, in light of the fact that Odysseus himself later uses it to describe the manner in which Polyphemus devoured the first of Odysseus' soldiers to die at the cannibals hands.⁶¹

Polyphemus' first act of violence against Odysseus and his men is sudden and horrific:

... he in pitiless spirit answered nothing, but sprang up and reached for my companions, caught up two together and slapped them, like killing puppies, against the ground, and the brains ran all over the floor, soaking the ground. Then he cut them up limb by limb and got supper ready, and *like a lion reared in the hills*, without leaving anything, ate them, entrails, flesh, and the marrowy bones alike. (*Od.* 9.287-293, italics mine)

This horrific moment is Odysseus' real introduction to the grim world of vicious monsters and sudden death that he will have to endure on his journey home. The use of the leonine simile in relation to Polyphemus' grim feasting evokes a marriage of thoroughness and gusto that is truly disquieting. There is some hint, however brief, of that same animal lust in the description of Odysseus' approach towards the Phaiakian girls. The use of the same comparison three books later shows how close to edge Odysseus is at this moment, that he has travelled so far outside of the bounds of human experience that he is no longer immediately recognizable to it. Most importantly, his reaction to the situation, though tempered by his constantly darting quick wits, is not the typically Achaean blithe anticipation of guest-friendship that he displays when first

⁶¹ *Od.* 9.292.

approaching Polyphemus.⁶² Instead, he responds to the evidence of nearby strangers with suspicion and a cautious approach governed only by his burning need; in short, just the attitude that Polyphemus showed him and his men.⁶³ Nausikaa's handmaidens sense some sign of this monstrous mindset and flee.

So we find a moment, however brief, in which Nausikaa, agent of civilization, finds herself facing an Odysseus cast in a monstrous light, an unknown being bearing none of the trapping of a civilized man, just as Odysseus himself once faced the Cyclops or Skylla. Odysseus has spent too long wandering out of human company and knowledge to be able to approach it without some kind of reorientation or symbolic reintegration. He has become one of Cohen's monsters, facing in Nausikaa a hero who represents order and culture. His mind racing, his unfailing wiliness plots a course that will either lay the groundwork for restoration to human society, or permanent banishment from it.

This is the danger of changing one's identity. Odysseus has traveled so far, endured so many chaotic encounters and adapted so much to meet each one on its own terms that he is now in danger of becoming that which he has emulated. In order to escape being devoured or married to the sea he has entered into a discourse with the sea, finally, as he dons Leukothea's veil, submerging himself in the deep. Just as Odysseus pushes the boundaries of how far a man can travel, he pushes the limits of how much he can alter himself in the course of reaching those far off boundaries. His tactic of guarding and changing his identity has succeeded and the only question, the final threat

⁶² *Od.* 9.259-271.

⁶³ *Od.* 9.253-255.

to his identity, is whether or not he can emerge from his ordeals as a member of human culture, or whether he will remain a hybrid sea creature.

This brief of moment passes, and then Odysseus' quick wits take over, producing a plea to Nausikaa full of both flattery and craftiness, culminating in an appeal to *xenia*:⁶⁴

Show me the way to town and then give me some rag to wrap me in, if you had any kind of piece of cloth when you came here, and then may the gods give you everything that your heart longs for... (*Od.* 6.178-180)

Nausikaa does better than find him a rag; she arranges for him to bathe and be anointed in olive oil, dressed in fine clothing from the laundry that they had been washing, and fed, all in perfect observation of *xenia*:

"But, since this is some poor wanderer who has come to us, we must now take care of him, since all strangers and all wanderers are sacred to Zeus, and the gift is a light and dear one. So, my attendants, give some food and drink to the stranger, and bathe him, where there is shelter from the wind, in the river." She spoke, and they stopped in their flight, encouraging each other, and led Odysseus down to the sheltered place, as Nausikaa daughter of great-hearted Alkinoos had told them to do, and laid out for him to wear a mantle and a tunic, and gave him limpid olive oil in a golden flask, and told him he could bathe himself in the stream of the river. (*Od.* 6.206-216)

This progression of bathing, to anointing, to dressing, to eating mirrors the way that Circe treats the men whom she has restored to their original forms. It is the application of the steps of *xenia* in their proper order. The effect of this process is the same for Odysseus as it was for his men as well. Starting as a brine-covered, naked man who has been bereft of true human company for years and is so far removed from his cultural identity that he is practically a monster himself, Odysseus is now slowly being integrated back into human society. He is, in effect, doing the exact opposite of what he did when he donned Leukothea's veil. Instead of symbolically stripping off his clothing and abandoning his ship, the symbol of his mastery of cultural production, he is, step by step, restoring those

⁶⁴ *Od.* 6.148-185.

portions of his estranged cultural identity. This process will culminate with not only his reintegration into something resembling Greek society, but his rise to prominence and respect within it, so that by the time he reveals his name in Book IX he does so to an enthralled audience, hanging on his every word.⁶⁵ His reintegration into the culture from which he has unhinged himself in order to survive is now complete, and he is ready to return to Ithaka, fully able to operate within Greek society once again.

This seems to be an appropriate place to leave Odysseus, restored to the identity that he sublimated when faced with the savagery of Polyphemus, and about to leave the fantastic chaos of the sea behind for the familiar comforts of Ithaka. The questions of hybridity, culture, and the maintenance of a flexible identity are not resolved on Phaiakia, of course. Odysseus bears the lessons of the sea's chaos into the chaos and disregard for *xenia* that he finds on Ithaka. There are many issues related to this topic which I hope to explore in later studies: the role of the Phaiakians as intermediaries between the fantastic and the familiar, Odysseus' various "Cretan tales" and his interaction with the Ithakans, and his treatment of the suitors. I also hope to explore the historical record more closely, and examine how the *Odyssey* may have helped to inform the Greek expansion of the pre-Classical period.

⁶⁵ *Od.* Books VI-IX. See *Od.* 9.19-20 for Odysseus' revelation of his true identity.

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